

Cedric J. Robinson  
An Anthropology  
of Marxism

SECOND EDITION

PREFACE BY

Avery F. Gordon

WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY

H. L. T. Quan

# AN ANTHROPOLOGY



Cedric J. Robinson

# OF MARXISM

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Second Edition

With a new foreword by H. L. T. Quan

Preface by Avery F. Gordon

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## PREFACE

*This preface introduced the publication of An Anthropology of Marxism by Ashgate in 2001. It was written because when I suggested to Cedric that the book, whose manuscript I had read, might benefit from an introduction, he told me to write it. It was both a challenge and an honor to do so. The book's reissue after languishing for so long unaffordable and unavailable is very welcome. The preface remains mainly as it was when first published with some minor revisions and editing.*

They came to Thessalonica . . . and Paul . . . reasoned with them out of the Scriptures. . . . And some of them believed . . . and of the chief women not a few. But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar . . . crying. These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also.—*The Acts of the Apostles* 17:1–6

Sometimes, there's a wonderful moment in reading when, all of a sudden, a book's importance becomes apparent as an embodied insight. Such a moment of profane illumination is always well prepared in advance but usually arrives, unpredictably of course, in the form of a revelation. When first I had the opportunity to read *An Anthropology of Marxism* that moment came for me at the close of chapter 4, "The Discourse on Economics." Robinson writes:

A more profound discontinuity existed between the inspirations of earlier Western socialist discourse and Marxism. Where once the dispositions of power, property, and poverty had been viewed as affronts to God's will and subversions of natural law, for Marx they were the issue of historical laws and personal and class ambition. . . .

By evacuating radical medieval philosophy from socialism's genealogy, Marx privileged his own ideological rules of discursive formation, providing a rationale for distinguishing a scientific socialism concomitant with the appearance of capitalist society from the lesser ("utopian") and necessarily inadequate articulation of socialism which occurred earlier. So doing, he deprived his own work of . . . profound and critical insights. . . . Notwithstanding their keen appetites for history, Marx and Engels had chosen to obliterate the most fertile discursive domain for their political ambitions and historical imaginations. Possibly even less troubling for them, they displaced a socialist motivation grounded on the insistence that men and women were divine agents for the fractious and weaker allegiances of class. (116)

It was the image of men and women as *divine agents* that registered, for me, the significance of *An Anthropology of Marxism's* critique of Marxism. This image did not conjure up religious solidarity or collectivities of well-dressed parishioners or regressive notions of posthumous justice, although it did remind me of the famous passage from *The Acts of the Apostles* about those "baser sorts" who "turned the world upside down." Rather, it pinpointed the moral stakes of the Marxian objective and the grace it promises, described eloquently by Robinson as "the recovery of human life from the spoilage of degradation" (1). And it located the impulse to realize that objective in our sovereign and creative divinity, that is, in our spirited consciousness and in our proven ability to remake the conditions and the history in which we live. For me, in this image, the confines of Marxism's powerful worldview—historical laws, class ambitions, scientific socialism, capitalist society—were lifted and the heterodox grounds for an alternative worldview set in place, right there in the insistence that men and women were *divine agents* and not just "the fractious and weaker" subjects of capitalism's class struggles. For what is illuminated here is a utopian socialism, unnecessarily narrowed and slighted by Marx, in which it is possible to realize the "scandal of the qualitative difference" because it is already part of who we are and how we conceive of ourselves as a people.<sup>1</sup> To conceive of ourselves as divine agents is to see ourselves as the executors—not the supreme rulers, but the guarantors—of our world and our imaginations. To ground socialist aspirations in a divine agency is to remove the stigma attached to the

utopian and to measure our freedom less by what subordinates us and more by what we are capable of divining.

Such a possibility is a profound and dissident challenge, particularly in an era when capitalism appears ascendant, ubiquitous and more dominant than ever and in which socialist alternatives, to the extent that they can be heard, must respect the supremacy of capitalism or neoliberalism to rule our current lives and the means by which we imagine living otherwise. A utopian socialism which holds fast to the urgency of recovering “human life from the spoilage of degradation” and which rejects the sovereignty or the inevitable authority of that which appears to rule us will inspire some, frighten others, and surely annoy even a few more. However, for those familiar with Cedric J. Robinson’s scholarship, this unorthodox warrant will come as no surprise. In *The Terms of Order*, *Black Marxism*, *Black Movements in America*, *An Anthropology of Marxism*, and *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*, Robinson pursued a consistent and rigorous deconstruction of the terms of Western civilization—its politics, its historiography, its economics, its racial ontologies, its “intoxications,” and its “trivializations.”<sup>2</sup> At the heart of Robinson’s critical project is the exposure of the philosophical and historical compromises Marxism and Liberalism have made with bourgeois society, compromises which, among other results, wedded the foundations and promise of socialism to capitalism. It is, in my view, the distinctive contribution of *An Anthropology of Marxism* to refuse those compromises on the grounds that they are not now nor ever have been necessary. It is a critical contribution, like all of Robinson’s work, forged in an enormously erudite and gracious spirit of reconstruction.

### Marxism’s Blind Spots

In order for there to be any sense in asking oneself about the terrible price to pay, in order to watch over the future, everything would have to be begun again. But in memory, this time, of that impure . . . history of ghosts.—JACQUES DERRIDA, *Specters of Marx*<sup>3</sup>

*An Anthropology of Marxism* is concerned with the Western origins of Marxism, with the place of capitalism and bourgeois society in the longer history of Western civilization’s modes of domination and comprehension, and with rehabilitating the socialist tradition by placing it on a different

footing. These themes and concerns were already evident in the book for which Cedric Robinson is probably best known, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. First published in 1983, this magisterial work questioned Marxism's indebtedness to Western "constructions" in light of the black radical tradition and the "denigration" to which it had been subjected. While acknowledging the significance and influence of Marxist opposition to class rule and the socialist vision that underwrites it, *Black Marxism* nonetheless stands as a rebuke to its "ominous" limitations. As Robinson states:

However, it is still fair to say that at base . . . at its epistemological substratum, Marxism is a Western construction—a conceptualization of human affairs and historical development which is emergent from the historical experiences of European peoples mediated, in turn, through their civilization, their social orders, and their cultures. Certainly its philosophical origins are indisputably Western. But the same must be said of its analytical presumptions, its historical perspectives, its points of view. This most natural consequence . . . has assumed a rather ominous significance since European Marxists have presumed more frequently than not that their project is identical with world-historical development. Confounded it would seem by the cultural zeal that accompanies ascendant civilizations, they have mistaken for universal verities the structures and social dynamics retrieved from their own distant and more immediate pasts. Even more significantly, the deepest structures of "historical materialism" . . . have tended to relieve European Marxists from the obligation of investigating the profound effects of culture and historical experience on their science. The ordering ideas which have persisted in Western civilization . . . have little or no *theoretical* justification in Marxism for their existence. One such recurring idea is racialism. . . . Though hardly unique to European peoples, its appearance and codification, during the feudal period, into Western conceptions of society was to have important and enduring consequences.<sup>4</sup>

In an effort to explain how Marxism could provide "no *theoretical* justification" for the historical emergence and persistence of a racialism so embedded in Western culture and so consequential to its development and existence, Robinson showcases his signature method of critical in-



quiry and *Black Marxism* realizes its most significant achievements. To summarize a work rendered far more complex than I can do it justice here, these achievements are three-fold.

First, Robinson painstakingly and persuasively rewrites the history of the rise of the West, demonstrating the significance of the pre-capitalist history of racism within the West to the development of a fundamentally “racial capitalism” and a racialized working class consciousness consistently mistaken by Marx and Marxists as derivative and epiphenomenal. Marxism’s brief for the “universality of class” and for the essentially autogenetic origins of capitalist society are confounded, in Robinson’s presentation, by the “particularities of race” and by the persistence of “architectonic possibilities previously embedded in [Western] culture.”<sup>5</sup>

Second, Robinson exposes a costly reductionism at the center of Marxian socialism’s attachment to the figure of the revolutionary proletariat. As Robinson shows, this intellectual, moral and libidinal investment bound the development of Marxian socialism to nationalism, racism, and bourgeois epistemology in such a way as to create a blind field at the very center of the socialist vision, a point to which he will return in *An Anthropology of Marxism*. This blind field created a historiography, a politics, and a morality, in short, a structure of anticipation or expectation, comprising an entire way of seeing. “When in its time Black radicalism became manifest within Western society as well as at the other junctures between European and African peoples, one might correctly expect that Western radicalism was no more receptive to it than were the apologists of power.”<sup>6</sup>

If Marx’s historical materialism was unable to understand black radicalism’s struggle, consciousness, and truth on “its own terms,” but only able to receive it as “merely an opposition to capitalist organization,” then *Black Marxism*’s greatest contribution was to have established this radical tradition’s distinction and authority, an authority that provided the intellectual basis for the revisionist history of the West Robinson proposed and that provided a distinct ontology, epistemology, and metaphysics of social struggle. The black radical tradition, however much it is an ongoing and contentious invention, is not in Robinson’s thinking only or mostly a colossal example of a blind-spot in the Marxist point of view. Rather, the black radical tradition stands, living and breathing, in the place blinded from view. It is, in the deepest sense of the term, a theoretical standpoint and not merely a set of particular data. Indeed, to

my mind, the remarkable accomplishment of *Black Marxism* was to brilliantly demonstrate just what was in the place of a missed opportunity to see the rich thought and the complex struggle comprising the black radical tradition—its collective wisdom—as an empirical and historical evidence worthy of theorization and thus of generalization. As the book makes abundantly clear, the black radical tradition is not a supplement to be appended to a partially flawed, but basically sound theoretical edifice of Marxism. “The difference,” Robinson states, is “not one of interpretation but comprehension. . . . Western society . . . has been [black radicalism’s] location and its objective condition but not—except in the most perverse fashion—its specific inspiration.”<sup>7</sup> It is precisely the mistake of taking what are ultimately contingent conditions and locations, what Robinson calls the “social cauldron,” as the limit of comprehension and inspiration which *Black Marxism* corrects and which *An Anthropology of Marxism* extends. And, it is precisely the vision of what has been and could be comprehended, as inspiration and as aspiration, which fulfills *Black Marxism*’s ambition.

## The Liberation of Socialism

*An Anthropology of Marxism* extends and completes Robinson’s critique of Marxism undertaken in *Black Marxism*.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the book could easily be subtitled, “The Making of the European Socialist Tradition,” where the term “making” carries the meaning of “an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning,” as E. P. Thompson put it.<sup>9</sup> If in their “historical imagination Marx and Engels had believed that socialism was the objective construction of the future, representing a decisive break with the pre-modern past” (119), in Robinson’s revisionist history, “socialist thought did not begin with or depend on the existence of capitalism” (13). As he states, “Socialism and Marxian socialism in particular were not the dialectical issue of the contradictions emergent in the capitalist era. . . . The socialist ideal was embedded in Western civilization and its progenic cultures long before the opening of the modern era” (16). While Marx and Marxism became the principal owners of nineteenth- and twentieth-century socialism, they did not, Robinson argues, invent socialism. They gave a “destiny” to scientific socialism by putting “older” socialist “currents into a secular format” (16) and creatively formulated

“a historical system which put the critique nurturing the political movement on empirical groundings, some of which were spurious” (35). As Robinson notes, they produced a “remarkable and fecund portrait of modern capitalism’s early development” and “without their intervention, radical politics in both the West and elsewhere might very well have lacked the conceptual purchase which proved so important” (123). However, these contributions, harnessed as they were to a “scientific destiny,” were made at the expense of the “displacement” and the trivialization of “previous and alternative socialisms,” which became in the course of time “poorly detailed blueprints or dead-end proto-forms” (17) of the destined socialism awaiting its future arrival.

Robinson puts proof to these points as he investigates the “taxonomy” and philosophical antecedents of Marxist historiography, the social origins of materialism and socialism, and the ancient genealogy of political economy. What we learn, among other important lessons, is that Marx’s fundamental claim that bourgeois society was a necessary precondition for socialism was mistaken. In an especially fascinating historical and theoretical excavation of pre-Marxian and pre-capitalist socialist discourses, poor rural and urban rebels, female mystics and “pious women,” Latin medieval philosophers, radical communitarians and communists, as well as “thieves, exiles, and excommunicates” take center stage in the making of a socialist tradition forged in a “heretical attack on the Church and revolutions against the ruling classes” (43). Focusing especially on twelfth- and thirteenth-century heretical Christian opposition to wealth, feudal power, and authoritarian corruption and on the variant of socialism institutionalized “in the most reactionary institution of medieval Europe: the Catholic Church” (58), Robinson delineates the “identification of wealth with evil” that bequeathed to Marx the “sign of the capitalist, the hoarder of material possessions, the thief” (58).

The antecedent sources of Marx’s appropriations are an important part of *An Anthropology’s* archaeological work and Robinson offers some truly surprising turns and canny discoveries, especially in the chapters on German philosophy and on economics. However, enhancing our knowledge of the genealogy of Marxism per se is not what motivates, in the Robinsonian meaning of that word, the book’s historical and philosophical inquiries. The purpose of Robinson’s investigation into pre-Marxian socialist discourses is to identify a fundamental “conceit” in Marx’s historical

judgment, in the way in which he comprehended the past, the present, and the future, and to stake out the consequences of this comprehension for the development and future trajectory of socialist thought. At issue for Robinson is the extent to which Marxism can lay claim, not to being a vital theory and practice of liberation, which is certain. The issue is whether Marxism can lay claim to being “*the* radical alternative to political economy” and the “emblematic opposition of the capitalist world-system, and as such, the modern world’s injustices” (89) for having discovered “the secrets of value or historical change” (89). For Marx and Engels, the secrets of value and change were to be found precisely in the bourgeoisie’s compulsion to, as they put it, “create a world after its own image” (119). Marx and Engels were also deeply informed by this compulsion and “in the enterprise of imagining and narrating a world history or a history of a world-system—in part derivative of Eurocentrism, in part a habituation to the epistemological presumptions of modern science as well as the Judeo-Christian monotheism” (118), they too created a world in the image of their own.

In suggesting that Marx and later Marxists truncated “the historical development of socialism” (89) on the assumption that a scientific socialism could not either logically or politically preexist the critique of political economy and bourgeois society, Robinson raises the stakes of his queries: “If a socialist discourse can be recovered from earlier (‘pre-capitalist’) eras, such a discovery would rupture the epochal confines of bourgeois epistemology sacred to both Liberalism and Marxism” (90). The confines of bourgeois epistemology are marked, at its boundaries, by the centrality of the capitalist world system, by what J. K. Gibson-Graham named a “capitalcentrism” that encloses all previous and future human affairs and arrangements in “the evolutionary history of capitalism” (118). Some of the consequences of capitalcentrism are better known today, but they are concisely and powerfully articulated in *An Anthropology*: the “exaggerated” importance of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (117); the “dismissive treatment of non-industrial labor” (119)—whether slaves, or the indentured, or peasants, or women—and their relegation to the “dustbin” of history; the “evangelical politics” of class struggle as the “penultimate competition for power” (117–18); and the “economistic conceit” that prevented “a more comprehensive treatment of history, classes, culture, race-ethnicity, gender, and language” (118).

It is worth emphasizing that Robinson's argument is not that Marx was a man of his time and consequently could not see or anticipate what we can today. (Or, conversely, that Marx's diagnostic analysis of capitalism is, ironically given the widespread obituaries of Marxism's demise, more true today than it was in the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup>) Robinson's argument is that Marx dismissed, as anomalous, anachronistic, primitive, and pre-historical, evidence, especially of an older socialism, which did not reflect the world as it was reflected to him. That dismissal inevitably led Marx to build into a theory and practice of revolutionary change some of the key ordering terms of the society he was trying to undermine. And, subsequently Marxism inherited a diminished capacity to imagine, anticipate, and receive—to comprehend or to interpret without subordination—those potent injuries, diagnoses, and remedies not well reflected in a mirror of capitalist production that had been deracinated and sexually neutered. Robinson's judgment here is clear: "Notwithstanding their keen appetites for history, Marx and Engels had chosen to obliterate the most fertile discursive domain for their political ambitions and historical imaginations" (116).

The idea that the inability to see beyond your own worldview and your own historical moment is a presumption and not an inevitable or immutable law of (capitalist) history itself was already well developed in *Black Marxism* where the "Black radical tradition cast doubt on the extent to which capitalism penetrated and re-formed social life and on its ability to create entirely new categories of human experience stripped bare of the historical consciousness in culture."<sup>11</sup> In fact, already in *The Terms of Order* Robinson had begun to question the assumption that we cannot fundamentally disturb human knowledge—"the relationship between existential consciousness and truth systems"—without resorting to a naive romanticism of "self-creation."<sup>12</sup> A systematic critique of the phenomenology of the political, *The Terms of Order* shows how the illusion of the density and immutability of social order is not only at the center of Western political thought, but is "the dominating myth of our consciousness of being together."<sup>13</sup> In demonstrating the contingency and replaceability of this myth, Robinson developed a method of deconstruction that finds fruition in *An Anthropology*. On the one hand, this method involves exposing the internal logics, the assumptions, the rules of enunciation, and the privileged objects and subjects which establish what a paradigm

understands and anticipates and what power/knowledge formation it thus sustains.<sup>14</sup> As Robinson puts it in *The Terms of Order*, “I have sought to expose from the vantage point inherited from a people only marginally integrated into Western institutions and intellectual streams, those contradictions within Western civilization which have been conserved at the expense of analytical coherence.”<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, this method involves denaturalizing (the anthropological function) what appears to us as natural history by revealing those subversive events, thoughts, behaviors, and potentialities which are covered over by a natural history’s references. Robinson’s anthropology is, in this sense, a historiography: “to refer the exposition of the argument to historical materials . . . served the purpose of resurrecting events which have systematically been made to vanish from our intellectual consciousness.”<sup>16</sup> The selection of the points of reference makes all the difference here.<sup>17</sup> For it is from the “vantage point” of these all too real vanishing points—Tonga philosophy and everyday life, black radicalism, pre-capitalist socialism—that it becomes possible to not only expose the terms of order from whose vantage point what’s illusory and what’s authentic is consistently mistaken and often reversed, but to liberate ourselves from them.

The goal of liberation is what the critique aims for. It is to the ends of “emancipating” socialism from the “ideological regime rigidly circumscribed by an attenuated and bourgeois construction of class struggle” (90) that Robinson pushes his critical argument that Marx suppressed an earlier history of Western socialism by “transfixing” (120) its origins to capitalist society. This fixation not only locked socialism into a proprietary relationship to Marxism, it also trivialized and marginalized an achieved socialist discourse that could neither be derived from nor reduced to a class-based opposition to capitalism. To liberate or emancipate socialism from “bourgeois constructions,” to put Robinson’s point in bold relief, is to see “resistance to capitalism” as a “derivative oppositional discourse, whose origins suggest a submerged and perhaps more profound historical crisis” (90).

The socialist tradition that Robinson uncovers and which finds its exemplar in medieval heretical radicalism was indeed more than an opposition to capitalist exploitation. It issued a morally authoritative analysis of the corrosive abuse of power, of the indignities of unrelieved poverty, and of the sacrificial value of private property ownership. It had a “conscious-

ness of female liberation,” of popular democracy, and of the inhumanity of slavery and “imperialist excess.” As Robinson puts it:

Both the ancients and . . . [Marx’s] own immediate predecessors . . . contributed to an inferior, more ambiguous, and misogynist consciousness of female liberation to that constituted in medieval radicalism. Similarly, the elevation of natural law philosophy by renegade medieval scholars into a formidable opposition to private property, racism, and imperialist excess was neglected. The alternative discourses, both of the ancient world and of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were directly implicated in the legitimation of slave economies, slave labor, and racism. Democracy, too, fueled by centuries of popular resistances, had acquired its better champions among medieval socialists. (116)

For Marxism, the implications of this “older and deeper” western socialism are humbling, but not fatal. “If not the privileged place claimed for it, it is certain that Marxism occupies a place in socialist history. Western socialism had older and deeper roots . . . radiat[ing] from the desperation, anguish and rage of the rural poor of the medieval era. . . . Its persistent reinvigoration in visions of an alternative social order was the consequence not of class hegemony but of a dialectic between power and resistance to its abuses” (123). For the moral project which Marxism has shared with many others—the *recovery of human life from the spoilage of degradation*—the implications provoke an inspiration we would be especially wise to recall today. As Robinson concludes the book:

Both in the West and the world beyond, the socialist impulse will survive Marxism’s conceits just as earlier it persevered the repressions of the Church and secular authorities. The warrant for such an assertion, I have argued, is located in history and the persistence of the human spirit. As the past and our present demonstrate, domination and oppression inspire that spirit in ways we may never fully understand. That a socialist discourse is an irrepressible response to social injustice has been repeatedly confirmed. On that score it has been immaterial whether it was generated by peasants or slaves, workers or intellectuals, or whether it took root in the metropole or the periphery. (124)

## The Dialectic of Power and Resistance

Of course we know how to walk on the water, of course we know how to fly.—GRANDMA DOROTHY<sup>18</sup>

If *An Anthropology of Marxism* is, at heart, an effort to rehabilitate socialism for today on the guarantee that it is a persistent and “irrepressible response to social injustice,” then who or what “generates” it may be more “material” than Robinson implies. Indeed, the restoration of and incitement to a socialist movement may require an entirely different understanding of historical materialism. I believe that Robinson offers such a radically revised conception in *An Anthropology*. The historical materialism Robinson proposes is, in its own way, a dialectics, but it trades even the most sophisticated Marxist notions of totality for a dialectic of power and resistance to its abuses. In *Black Movements in America*, Robinson quotes Frantz Fanon, but he could be summarizing his own position: “It was not the *organization of production* but the persistence and *organization of oppression* which formed the primary basis for revolutionary activity.”<sup>19</sup> There are several aspects of Robinson’s historical materialism that are worth describing.

First, Robinson’s historical materialism is grounded in the primacy of social struggle, not the primacy of racial capitalism, and thus yields a dialectics without determinism, but with a strong notion of internal contradiction. Occupying a paradigmatic place in Robinson’s historical anthropology is the story of how the Catholic Church appropriated the most radical impulses of mass poverty movements, of its renegade philosophers and “pious women” in an effort to contain their challenges to its delinquent and exploitative rule. The example of medieval heresy and the elevation of heresy itself to a model of oppositional consciousness not only demonstrates that it is often from within the most “reactionary institutions” that a critical discourse of poverty, property, and power arises as the measure of internal contradiction.<sup>20</sup> It also provides a generative conception of internal contradiction without its usual complement and container, determinism. The Church’s appropriation of its internal heretics is not, in Robinson’s example, a sign of the determinant power of the institution, but a sign of its weakness. As many writers as diverse as James Baldwin, Patricia Williams, and Toni Morrison have eloquently argued, the exercise of power is a taxing enterprise,



which perverts and weakens those who sustain its exercise precisely because it is sacrificial and it is always resisted. To see the powerful as weak and the weak as powerful is not to deny, in an act of willful disregard, the calamities of unrestrained authority, the dehumanization of bonded or “free” servitude, the alienations of exploited labor, or the violence of dictatorial ideas. Rather, it is a way to expose the illusion of supremacy and unassailability dominating institutions and groups routinely generate to mask their fragility and their contingency. It is a way to see through to a vision of the authority of our heretical beliefs and resistance as the very material source of historical development and change.

The vantage point of Robinson’s historical materialism is not the unassailability of the powerful and their systems of production, governance, and consciousness, but their weakness and instability. In all his work, Robinson points to the chaos or the incoherence of that which escapes the illusions of order and sense-making; he points to the fugitive reality that unsettles and that constitutes an alternative way of living and thinking. In this sense, if the core proposition of Marx’s historical materialism, simplified, is that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence but on the contrary their social existence that determines their consciousness,” then we might say that the core proposition of Robinson’s historical materialism, simplified, is exactly the reverse.<sup>21</sup> This is very clear in *Black Marxism* where Robinson argues that racial capitalism is the location and objective condition in which black radicalism emerges but is not its “inspiration.” Like that of the capacious socialism that preexists capitalism evoked in this book, black radicalism’s inspiration for a livable existence is, in effect, a negation of that which seeks to determine it.

Robinson’s dialectics without determinism, grounded in the primacy of social struggle and independent thought, produces a dialectics without messianic agents, but rich with legends of people who can fly home across the sea, walk on the water, and traffic with ghostly or divine spirits; who produce profound and enduring knowledge without sanctioned authority, who courageously and quietly rebel against subordinations and inhibitions, and who forge seemingly impossible alliances. The legends which populate Robinson’s historical materialism narrate a heresy that dispenses with savior subjects, such as the proletariat, autocratic leadership, and identitarian hierarchies based on specious racialisms, whether of culture, ethnicity or gender. Robinson’s historical materialism offers

a mode of anticipation and reception that naturalizes the persistent opposition to power and its abuses as its historiography and as its futurity. In this historical materialism, the cultivation of critical discourses of poverty, property and power, wherever they may arise, is all we have. The only certainty, such as it is, lies in the “resistances, which are the inevitable companions to oppression.” In a series of lectures Robinson gave in 2012, he said, with some vehemence: “One of the weaknesses of Black radicalism in most of its forms is that it lacks the promise of a certain future. Unlike Marxism [where] victory is inevitable eventually, in Black radicalism it is not. Only when that radicalism is costumed . . . in Black Christianity is there a certainty to it. Otherwise it is about a kind of resistance that does not promise triumph or victory at the end, only liberation. No nice package at the end, only that you would be free. . . . Only the promise of liberation, only the promise of liberation!”<sup>22</sup>

Robinson’s historical materialism is, thus also, a dialectics without the presumption of Western science and its natural laws, but with a mode of knowledge production in which the history of power and resistance to its abuses is the test of theoretical and ethical adequacy. Here history—and Robinson’s historical materialism is deeply historical—is neither a fetish nor a substitute positivism. Rather, it is the source of a vantage point centered on an understanding of how we could live more justly and humanely with each other. Robinson’s historical materialism and his politics are, in this sense, an expression, not of scientific thought, but of utopian thought for they “confront bad facticity with its better potentialities.”<sup>23</sup> As Herbert Marcuse put it, “when truth cannot be realized within the established order, it always appears to the latter as mere utopia.” “Mere utopia” is nowhere we can really live. It is the impossible, unrealizable, a paradise for unrealistic dreamers, a luxury for those who can afford to be impractical, and a “breeder of illusions and . . . disillusion.”<sup>24</sup> Robinson rejects the repressive reality principle contained in the dismissal of utopian aspirations as “mere utopia” because from the vantage point he establishes it is the trivialization of these aspirations and their manifestations that breeds the illusion of their irreality and social irrelevance. The possibility of “the scandal of the qualitative difference” is what Robinson’s historical materialism emphasizes. Such a vantage point, one must say without embarrassment, is the standpoint of the beloved.<sup>25</sup> And, indeed, implied in *An Anthropology* is a severe warning about the dangers of being too much in love with (too committed to) what

one hates and hopes to destroy. In a letter to Marisela Marquez, he wrote that his earliest intentions were “to re-open a door to a special universe where justice reigned as historical practice; as a constant inspiration for present conduct; and as a realizable project.”<sup>26</sup> Robinson did not like the word “utopian” because of its connotation of naiveté and impossibility, but one could see this “special universe where justice reigned as historical practice” as a kind of utopian world, the kind that emerges precisely from the “accretion, over generations, of collective intelligence gathered from struggle.”<sup>27</sup>

In other words, Robinson’s historical materialism is very much an immanent materialism: a dialectics without fatalism or teleology yet sensitive to the question of fate. In the struggle against power and its abuses, three questions of fate, which are also questions of individual and collective trust, become paramount. These questions are: What is fated for us? Who cares about our fate? And, to whom can our fate be entrusted? In such a struggle, the unpredictability of the outcome can become itself a kind of fatalism, a way in which we conceive of and think about fate. Fatalism can take many forms—it can be cynical, apocalyptic, fanatical, smartly intellectualized, or just resigned. It can also, as in the dominant tradition of Marxism, be built into the very architecture of a theory of history and revolutionary change. We return here to the problem of the nature of a capitalist world system whose power is so vast that it determines not only what is but what could be as well, a system not only capable of obliterating the traces of its origins but capable of determining its own future trajectory, including its demise. Robinson’s historical materialism rejects capitalcentrism of whatever variety because it yields a biased preoccupation with and investment in the fate of a seemingly sovereign system. There is an implicit standpoint in capitalcentrism tied to the question of fate. This standpoint is the standpoint of the life of the capitalist world system. The life of the system is the source of analytical attraction and cathexis. The life of the system is the source of intellectual and political authority. The life of the system pulls us in tow and sometimes in thrall. The life of the system sets the fundamental parameters for what is to be known and done. The life of the system is the measure of our freedom, the image out of which our will to change it and the effective exercise of that will is carved and beholden. As I’ve suggested, Robinson operates from a different standpoint and offers an alternative notion of fate in which “we are not the subjects of or the subject formations of the

capitalist world-system. It is merely one condition of our being.”<sup>28</sup> If we are not the subjects of the capitalist world system, then we do not need its sovereign authorization to direct and protect our fate. We may instead, with the force of the history of the dialectic of power and resistance to its abuses in mind and in hand, insist that we possess precisely the divine agency to motivate a socialism which can eliminate all those fractious and weaker allegiances that degrade our existence.

From the first to the last . . . *An Anthropology of Marxism* augurs that Marxism was not the first expression of an authentic and viable socialism and that it will not be the last. Our socialism today will no doubt take global capitalism as one crucial and deathly condition of our being and our opposition. Robinson’s critique of Marxism is not a rejection in toto of Marx’s insights nor a denigration of the commitments made by Marxists. The target of Robinson’s critique is the “proprietary impulse” of Marxism: the presumption of the ownership of the properties—the resources, rules, definitions, histories, agencies, legends, imaginations—necessary for an adequate practice of liberation. The proprietary impulse and the havoc it wreaks is by no means unique to Marxism. But neither, Robinson asserts, is the socialist critique of private property. One invaluable contribution of *An Anthropology of Marxism* is the means it gives us to imagine a non-proprietary socialist critique of private property.

Robinson was an uncompromising critic of what he called “fictive radicalisms,” whether these are the fables of American democracy, the “conceits” of Marxism, or the simplifications of ethno-nationalisms. The goal of these critiques and the selection of the vantages or standpoints from which the critiques were undertaken—the black radical tradition, the pre-capitalist heretical socialists, the motley crew of American rebels—was to free or emancipate the radical impulse from the exclusivities, rigidities and vanities that too frequently characterize radical thought and action. The historical materialism Robinson proposed had one root—“the recovery of human life from the spoilage of degradation”—but many branches or traditions. Cedric Robinson’s contributions and loyalty to the black radical tradition are legendary. Perhaps with the publication of this book, Robinson’s historical materialism will become more well-known. But readers be aware: Since as a theoretical system, it is not terribly systematic, lacking clear rules and postulates; as a basis for an intellectual school, it lacks the requisite ambitions; as instruction, it is reasonably

clear but leaves you to figure it out collectively with others; and as a political identity, it is rather promiscuous and autonomous.

“He . . . pursued a critique . . . that implicated an alternative historical agency, an alternative signification of liberation, an alternative reconstruction of modern history, an alternative epistemology of human desire.”<sup>29</sup> Cedric Robinson used these words to introduce Richard Wright. I can think of no better ones with which to conclude my introduction to Cedric Robinson’s book and to thank him for the rare and precious work he has given us.

In the original acknowledgments I thanked Cedric Robinson for sharing the book with me while he was still writing it and Christopher J. Newfield, H. L. T. Quan, and Elizabeth Robinson for their assistance and insights at the time. Abebe Zegeye should also be acknowledged, for it was his efforts that led to the book’s original publication with Ashgate. I would also like to thank Jenny Bourne and Hazel Waters for reprinting the original preface in the 2005 special issue of *Race & Class*, “Cedric Robinson and the Philosophy of Black Resistance,” guest edited by Darryl C. Thomas.

*Avery F. Gordon*



21. Naomi Klein, "A Radical Vatican," *The New Yorker*, July 10, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-visit-to-the-vatican>.

22. Arundhati Roy, "Speech to a People's University," in Roy, *Capitalism*.

## PREFACE

1. The phrase is from Herbert Marcuse, "The End of Utopia," in *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro and Shierry M. Weber (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1970), 69. See also Avery F. Gordon, *The Hawthorn Archive: Letters from the Utopian Margins* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

2. Cedric J. Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership* (originally published in 1980), with an introduction by Erica R. Edwards (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (originally published in 1983), with an introduction by Robin D. G. Kelley (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Movements in America* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). In addition to these major books, Robinson has written many essays, some of which have been collected and edited by Elizabeth Robinson and H. L. T. Quan in a volume forthcoming from Pluto Press.

3. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 175.

4. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 2.

5. *Ibid.* That revisionist history has been taken up and extended most directly and explicitly by Lisa Lowe in *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

6. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 3.

7. *Ibid.*, 72–73. It's been my impression that often the title *Black Marxism* has been misconstrued as describing the identity of its author. In case it bears making more explicit, I do not think it is accurate to describe Robinson as a "black Marxist."

8. The published origin of this critique is actually *The Terms of Order*. And, as H. L. T. Quan pointed out to me, despite its prior publication date, *Black Movements in America* is usefully read as an application of the themes and concerns explored in *An Anthropology of Marxism*, particularly in its attention to the signal role of women and the black church in the history of mass black political movements in America, and in its analytic focus on visions of social justice. It might be worth noting here one way in which *An Anthropology of Marxism* departs from *Black Marxism*. The departure is not, I think, to be located in what appears to be the obvious contrast between a black radical tradition conceived as "the negation of Western civilization" and a socialist tradition squarely located within it, although *An Anthropology of Marxism*'s object of analysis is a choice with tremendous significance for how we understand radical thought and movements today. The departure hinges on what appears to be a radical break in *An Anthropology of Marxism* with the dialectical power of racial capitalism to issue its most "formidable opposition." In Gibson-Graham's terms, *An Anthropology of Marxism* presumes "the end of capitalism (as we knew it)" not only as a future-oriented goal, but as a condition for recognizing, to quote Robinson from *Black Marxism*, that which "cements pain to

purpose, experience to expectation, consciousness to collective action.” See J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), and Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 317.

9. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1968), 9. Thompson’s definition of class as a “historical phenomenon” — not a “structure” or “even . . . a category,” but the mix of the “raw material of experience and consciousness . . . which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships” — is not unlike what Robinson means when he approaches the socialist tradition as a historical phenomenon.

10. When the preface was first written, this position was becoming increasingly popular. For its most succinct statement, see William Greider, “The Ghost of Marx,” chap. 3 in *One World Ready or Not: The Manic Logic of Global Capitalism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

11. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 170. This doubt is central to everything Robinson ever wrote, said, and did because it is always liberation or, as he eloquently put it in *Anthropology*, “the recovery of human life from the spoilage of degradation” (ooo) that motivates the critical excavations whether of the origin of Western civilization or the history of European socialism or of those racial regimes sutured by early Hollywood cinema to the making of a white supremacist capitalist nation.

12. Robinson, *The Terms of Order*, 214.

13. *Ibid.*

14. This method of critically examining discourse we commonly associate today with Michel Foucault. In both *An Anthropology of Marxism* (ooo) and *The Terms of Order*, Robinson notes the debt to Foucault for “the bold yet elegant turn by which he reinserted Marxism into bourgeois cosmology.” But there is only a superficial similarity between the two thinkers. For Robinson’s critique of Foucault, see *The Terms of Order*, chaps. 4 and 6; *An Anthropology of Marxism*, chap. 4; and *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*, preface.

15. Robinson, *The Terms of Order*, xxiv–xxx.

16. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 307.

17. What Robinson intends by the notion of reference is considerably broader than its colloquial meaning: “The total institutions of Western society: disciplines, modern political parties, State bureaucracies and the scientific establishment, are not merely the germinal arenas for these metaphysics but their reference as well—the analogy of their subsequent application.” *The Terms of Order*, 129 (emphasis added).

18. Toni Cade Bambara, “The Education of a Storyteller,” in Bambara, *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon, 1996), 255.

19. Robinson, *Black Movements in America*, 134.

20. See also Michael Taussig on the case of Roger Casement in *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

21. Karl Marx, “Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy” (1859), in Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Lucio Colletti (London: Penguin, 1975), 425.

22. Cedric J. Robinson and Elizabeth P. Robinson, preface to Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin, eds., *Futures of Black Radicalism* (New York: Verso, 2017), 7.

23. Herbert Marcuse, “Philosophy and Critical Theory” (1937), in *Negations: Essays*



in *Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Free Association, 1988), 143. Angela Y. Davis brought this passage to my attention many years ago. See also Marcuse, "The End of Utopia."

24. Marcuse, "Philosophy and Critical Theory," 143. The phrase "breeder of illusions and . . . disillusioners" is from Immanuel Wallerstein, *Utopistics: or, Historical Choices of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: New Press, 1998), 1.

25. I am thinking here not only of what Toni Morrison has taken the beloved to mean, but also how A. Sivinandan delicately locates it in the interstices of home-based political education and anticolonial struggle in his magnificent novel *When Memory Dies* (London: Arcadia, 1997).

26. Marisela Marquez, executive director of associated students at the University of California Santa Barbara, read from this letter at the memorial service for Robinson held on June 16, 2016, in Santa Barbara.

27. This is Robinson's description of the black radical tradition in *Black Marxism*, xxx.

28. Cedric J. Robinson, "Manichaeism and Multiculturalism," in Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield, eds., *Mapping Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 122.

29. Cedric Robinson, introduction to Richard Wright, *White Man, Listen!* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995), xx.

## CHAPTER 1

1. The proletariat was originally the term used to designate the large class of poor, free citizens of the early Roman empire. Cf. Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). According to Herman E. Daly, "The literal Latin meaning of 'proletariat' is 'those with many offspring,'" and the full ancient Roman sense of the word is "the lowest class of a people, whose members, poor and exempt from taxes, were useful to the republic only for the procreation of children." "A Marxian-Malthusian View of Poverty and Development," *Population Studies* 25 (1971): 25.

2. William Reddy, *Money and Liberty in Modern Europe: A Critique of Historical Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 26; for E. P. Thompson see his *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966).

3. Reddy, *Money and Liberty in Modern Europe*, 27. Cf. Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); George Taylor, "Noncapitalist Wealth and the Origins of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 72 (1967): 469–96; and Colin Lucas, "Nobles, Bourgeois and the Origins of the French Revolution," *Past and Present* 60 (1973): 84–126.

4. Cf. Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978). Terrell Carver has persuasively argued that Engels borrowed this schema from Moses Hess's *The Triarchy of Europe*. Cf. Carver, "Engels and the French Revolution," paper presented at the American Political Science Association meetings, Atlanta, September 1989.

5. Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," 622.

6. Lichtheim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 245. This was, of course, not precisely the case even in Engels's own lifetime. For