

The future of radical scholarship*

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Abstract: What is the essence of radical scholarship? How does it relate to subjugated knowledge and those experiences historically dismissed as of little account? Its relationship to truth telling and its attempt to extend the boundaries of what is known and knowable are here discussed in relation to Robinson's lifetime work. It is grounded both in a refusal to compromise and, in Robinson's phrase, in 'the recovery of human life from the spoilage of degradation'.

Keywords: academia, *Black Marxism*, Black radical tradition, Cedric Robinson

In 1714, Bernard de Mandeville, the Anglo-Dutch amoral philosopher and proselytising vegetarian, wrote the book that brought him public notoriety. Based on a poem he published some nine years earlier,

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The Fable of the Bees tells the story of a wealthy and powerful beehive whose inhabitants act only in pursuit of private gain and personal aggrandisement. All the same, they loudly voice their belief in an ethic that condemns this behaviour and frequently lament that their society is full of sin. Irritated by their constant hypocritical complaining, their god decides to make them all truly virtuous. In a flash, their society breaks down: trade and industry, as they knew them, are abandoned, and the bees leave their hive and withdraw to live simply in the hollow of a tree. Needless to say, this is not an African fable and the bees do not learn the virtues of honesty and sharing. Mandeville wrote *The Fable of the Bees* to help fabricate the justification for factory discipline, imperial trade, and an accompanying ideology that treats private property as public wealth and self-interest as social regard. Thus, the moral Mandeville draws from his tale is that virtue can only lead to an impoverished society, while immorality is the necessary engine of a wealthy and powerful nation. As might be expected, the wealth of Mandeville's nation depended on maintaining what he called the 'meanest circumstances' and in consequence he did not look kindly upon universal education:

To make the Society Happy and People Easy under the meanest Circumstances, it is requisite that great numbers of them should be Ignorant as well as Poor. Knowledge both enlarges and multiplies our Desires . . . The Welfare and Felicity therefore of every State and Kingdom require that the Knowledge of the Working Poor should be confin'd within the Verge of their Occupations and never extended (as to things visible) beyond what relates to their Calling. The more a Shepherd, a Plowman or any other Peasant knows of the World, and the things that are Foreign to his Labour or Employment, the less fit he'll be to go through the Fatigues and Hardships of it with Chearfulness and Content.¹

Radical scholars, of course, begin, again and again it seems, by refusing to make 'Society Happy and People Easy under the meanest Circumstances', by doing their best to extend knowledge beyond the 'verge' of narrow occupations and forced callings, and sometimes even treat what the Shepherd, Plowman or Peasant knows of the world as worthy knowledge. They also, in the best cases, try to avoid justifying hypocritical or opportunistic behaviour, their own or others', with Mandevillian fables.

In the most general terms, radical scholarship touches the roots or the sources of what Cedric Robinson calls 'the terms of order' by exposing its presumptions, its lies, its costs and its consequences, although radical scholarship's standpoints (the vantage from which it looks and sees), its evidentiary methods, reporting genres, aesthetic forms and

subjective impacts vary widely. Radical scholarship includes often-conflicting customs and traditions and it is also shaped by the temperaments and experiences of its producers who lean in one way or another as a result. Radical scholarship is absolutely truth-telling, even when it knows there are no absolute truths; and it is oppositional, often cranky if not unrelentingly angry. Radical scholarship also harbours lived epistemologies that structure, either implicitly or explicitly, the questions its practitioners ask and they answers they give. These epistemologies – the ideas behind the ideas so to speak – are one part of the root or source of radical thought or scholarship itself, although it needs to be said clearly that radical thought and radical scholarship are not the same by any means. In my own work, I have wanted to expand what scholars have counted as radical thought and practice so that it is both more accurate and more democratic. I have been most interested in the evidence of things barely seen and in the subjugated knowledge of individuals and groups historically dismissed as incapable of producing general knowledge. I have tried to understand what the lived epistemologies of subjugated knowledge teach us about the systematic powers that injure and aggrieve us and about how to live better than we are told to.

Cedric Robinson has been my esteemed colleague and valued friend for fourteen precious years. I met Cedric and began to read *Black Marxism* shortly after I arrived to teach at Santa Barbara. The encounter was a very important one for me. I had been trained intellectually and politically in the Marxist tradition, predominantly in the English Marxist tradition, and yet I had never read Cedric's book. More pointedly, no one had ever suggested it was a requirement. I learned a great deal from the unique combination that is Cedric's brilliance, political acumen, humanism and moral integrity – not to mention his mania for historical archives and, more recently, obscure cable television programmes I have never once seen! I think it's fair to say that Cedric's work changed the way I thought and, at the same time, it directed definitive changes I was already in the process of making. Since that first-time reading, my admiration and respect for Cedric's contributions and for Cedric (it is not possible nor desirable for me to parse the contributions of the published author from the man himself) has continued and deepened, not the least because he himself has remained on the move, honing his craft with great precision, always forward-looking.

I am going to identify a feature of Cedric's work that has been important to me and that I think offers a principled epistemological practice that serves radical scholarship well and is needed for its future viability. That feature is Cedric's uncompromising attitude towards the analytically possible or towards what we can be expected to know.

From the beginning, at the centre of Cedric's critical project has been the exposure of the philosophical and historical compromises Marxism, as theory and practice, has made with bourgeois society and with a deadly racism it consistently underestimated. In a trilogy of works – *Black Marxism*, *Black Movements in America* and *Anthropology of Marxism* – Cedric established a general approach to deconstructing accommodations to racism and to the lies of authority that has continued into the major research he is presently completing on Blacks in Hollywood cinema. The motivation behind the exposé, and it is I believe the driving force behind all authentic radical thought, is, as Cedric has eloquently written, 'the recovery of human life from the spoilage of degradation'. The locale of that spoilage has mattered in detail, not just principle, to him; life taxed and taken in fields or factories or prisons, in science or in art, the recovery of it and its value has remained the critical instigation. Though they are without doubt formidable, what is striking and, I feel, unique are not Cedric's formal deconstructive skills. What I think is unique is that he has taken for granted, seemingly without effort, and demonstrated, with great care, that the compromises, the settlements, the sanctioned irrelevancies, and the exclusions of the 'too hard to think about', are not necessary at all.

The question of the necessity of compromise is a constant one in political movements and in political life. Longstanding, seemingly unresolvable, debates about reform and revolution and about what is real and what is impossible have spun around genuinely difficult problems of simultaneously fighting and winning power and also spun around genuinely annoying cultures of sectarianism and self-righteousness. There is, remarkably in my opinion, neither sectarianism nor self-righteousness in Cedric's writings (or elsewhere, for that matter). And yet, his attitude or his lived epistemology is uncompromising.

This has been evident in Cedric's critique of Marxism. In both *Black Marxism* and in the *Anthropology of Marxism*, he rejects the notion that Marx could not have done any better than he did. In both works, Cedric shows that Marx and Marxism as a tradition made choices and pursued specific paths, with consequences not entirely to its credit.

At the heart of *Black Marxism* is a critique of and explanation for why it could have been that Marxism provided no 'theoretical justification' for the emergence and persistence of racialism in western civilisation. The book painstakingly outlines the significance of the pre-capitalist history of racism within the West to the development of a fundamentally racial capitalism and a racialised working-class consciousness consistently mistaken by Marx and Marxists as derivative and epiphenomenal. It shows that Marxism's reductionism made it unable to understand Black radicalism's struggle, consciousness and truth on its own terms. In Cedric's presentation, however, the Black

radical tradition stands not simply or only as a colossal example of a blind spot in the Marxist point of view. Rather, it stands living and breathing in the place blinded from view. And I think the difference between being an example of a superior person's or system's faulty thinking (the paradigmatic mistake) and being an example of the better thinking you are trying to generate is very important. It marks the distinction between self-determination and assimilationism. And, it easily distinguishes those whose radicalism is attached, whether they know it or not, to people who are above the salt or people who are below the salt, as Mandeville's contemporaries would have described it. At the heart of *Black Marxism* is the deceptively simple idea that there is something and somebodies in the blind spot. And what's in the place blinded from view, is an entire theoretical standpoint – a practical mode of comprehension that Cedric calls the Black radical tradition; not nothing or merely some missing information or a few neglected individuals. *Black Marxism*, whatever revisions, extensions, disagreements we might want to have with it today, brilliantly showed us 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 evidence worthy of theorisation and thus generalisation.

In the *Anthropology of Marxism*, where Cedric extends *Black Marxism*'s critique to the western socialist tradition, we find the same approach. It is from the vantage point of an older pre-capitalist socialist discourse, made by female mystics and pious women, poor rural and urban rebels and radical communitarians and communists, that Cedric puts proof to his argument that 'scientific socialism' with its privileged European male proletariat agent was unnecessarily limited and exclusive. Here, too, Cedric rejects the view that Marx was simply a man of his time and could not have known better; that only today we hold the missing pieces to complete the earlier ambition. Instead, he argues that Marx actively dismissed as anomalous, anachronistic, unscientific and pre-historical, evidence of a richer socialism when it did not reflect the capitalist world as he saw it. In that dismissal, Marx built into a theory and practice of revolutionary change, which lingers in political culture still today, some of the key ordering terms of the very society he was trying to undermine, not the least of which was the idea that socialism was the privileged preserve of class-based oppositions to capitalism. In consequence, Marxism inherited a diminished capacity to imagine, anticipate and receive – to comprehend – those potent injuries, diagnoses and remedies not well reflected in the mirror of capitalist production and bourgeois hegemony.

By contrast, Cedric has worked, as scholar, as teacher, as faculty governor, as television reporter, commentator and producer, and as an active member of the Santa Barbara community, to enhance our

capacity to comprehend abuses of power and to resist them. Cedric has been an uncompromising critic of what he calls ‘fictive radicalisms’, whether these are the Mandevillian progressive fables of today, or the ‘conceits’ (another favourite Robinsonian word) of Marxism, or the ‘simplifications’ and exploitations of Black nationalism. It is always clear in Cedric’s work that the goal of the critique of ‘fictive radicalism’ and the selection of the vantage points from which it is undertaken – the Black radical tradition, the pre-capitalist heretical socialists – is to liberate or emancipate the radical impulse from the exclusivities, rigidities and vanities that too frequently characterise radical leaders and radical scholars and that deform and weaken the impulse itself. Now more than ever, we need exactly the kind of radicalism Cedric Robinson has promoted and articulated: ‘focused (up)on the cultural legacies that have provided [the Black radical tradition with] its strengths’, ‘capable of converging and diverging’ with the many radical traditions active today, and always grounded in and attached to the *recovery of human life from the spoilage of degradation*.

In a 1999 interview, Chuck Morse asked Cedric, ‘how do you define your own political commitments?’ Cedric replied:

What name do you give to the nature of the Universe? . . . My only loyalties are to the morally just world; and my happiest and most stunning opportunity for raising hell with corruption and deceit are with other Black people. I suppose that makes me a part, an expression, of Black radicalism.²

The joy, the universalism, and the invitation to the many that this Black radicalism makes is what I hope the future of radical scholarship will cultivate and grow.

It is what I most associate with Cedric Robinson.

References

- 1 Quoted in E. P. Thompson (ed.), ‘Custom and culture’, in *Customs in Common* (London, Penguin, 1993), p. 3.
- 2 Chuck Morse, ‘Capitalism, Marxism, and the Black radical tradition: an interview with Cedric Robinson’, *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory* (Vol. 3, no. 1, spring 1999).