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## Book Reviews

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**Blackwater: Historical Studies in Race, Class Consciousness and Revolution**  
by Manning Marable, Black Praxis Press,  
1981.  
\$19.95 (paper \$7.95).

This volume is truly a remarkable work: a combination of poetry, essays and criticism discussing black economics and politics, history and culture. Dr. Marable, whose syndicated column appears in over 120 newspapers in the United States and the United Kingdom, combines a theoretical culture of considerable breadth with the keen political eye of a dedicated activist in the National Black Independent Political Party. The militant tradition of black faith and consciousness of oppression—what Marable calls Blackwater—is the central theme around which everything in this collection revolves. His primary thrust is to deepen the Marxist understanding of the dialectic and dynamic of race and class in this country. This effort is embodied in a number of essays which explore various dimensions of this issue: from Nat Turner to the Miami Rebellion of 1980, from black religion to black nationalism.

In his political writings Manning Marable is an unsparing critic. His indictment of the capitalist state and US imperialism is coupled with an equally vehement criticism of the black bourgeoisie. He charges the latter with cultural poverty and political opportunism, with cowering before the might of capital, while disdaining to conceal its contempt for the black masses. At the same time, Dr. Marable argues that the black left has made serious errors in its own right, relying on shallow theory, and failing to put forward a clear political agenda which could unite black workers, students and the unemployed.

This polemic is not directed against the black left alone—both black and white Marxists have been guilty of infantile left posturing, mechanical copying of foreign examples, and the failure to take up advanced theory and apply it to American conditions. Again and again Marable returns to the need for a developed and all-sided theory of black oppression together with the political process of forging an independent black political party. In this regard he urges the left to take up and study not just Marx and Lenin, but also Gramsci, Colletti, Althusser and Poulantzas. The essays, “Through the Prism of Race and Class: Black Nationalism Since the Civil Rights Movement,” and “Black Politics in Transition: the Red Year of 1980” are concrete steps toward these goals.

There are other chapters, however, which are more historical in character, for instance the one on land tenure and agriculture in the South, or the one on religion and black protest in Afro-American history. Still others have as their focus general questions of US revolutionary politics such as the one on “Transitional Strategies for Black and

Progressive Politics in America,” and another on the “Racist/Capitalist State.”

It is in no sense meant to diminish the importance of this book to point out a number of weaknesses in it. Nonetheless, we feel impelled to point them out in an effort to advance the discussion which this volume will stimulate. Dr. Marable is profoundly influenced by the work of Antonio Gramsci, and attempts to apply it to his own analyses. This effort is hampered, however, by the strongly “culturalist” reading of Gramsci to which he appears to subscribe. Such a reading of Gramsci is not uncommon: for some time it has been the norm among leading Euro-Communists and Social Democrats. Only recently have revolutionary Marxists in the English speaking world begun to actively challenge this erroneous view.

The “culturalist” approach to Gramsci cannot help but affect the effort to apply his views to contemporary politics. For Dr. Marable it leads to seeing hegemony not so much as a *political* practice but as a cultural one. In the same fashion, the war of position/war of movement dichotomy is also given what we would argue is a fundamentally non-Gramscian cast. In our interpretation, Gramsci defined the war of position as one of building class-political hegemony in a period of relative stability while the war of movement is one of advancing this hegemony in periods of organic crisis. Marable, however, seems to use these terms to distinguish ideological resistance (war of position) from coercive resistance (war of movement).

The result of this interpretation is to downplay the importance of ideological struggle in revolutionary periods, when coercive struggle becomes important. This can lead to serious errors: when the handling of contradictions among the people by ideological means is essential, the use of force instead can be disastrous. In the essay, “The Third Reconstruction,” for example, Dr. Marable advocates the creation of a post-revolutionary America of autonomous Black Districts in cities of over 250,000 with a majority black population. Such districts would have the right to declare themselves sovereign states and to forcibly disenfranchise and remove all remaining whites still living within their boundaries. Aside from the problems associated with the idea of a multiplicity of separate small nations in the transition period, any proposal that revolutionaries solve racial contradictions among the people through force rather than ideological struggle seems to be a dubious one, fraught with serious contradictions. In any case this is a proposal which requires considerable critical discussion and prolonged debate. My own feeling is that this strategy will not withstand sustained scrutiny.

These criticisms notwithstanding, the importance of this book for pointing Marxist theoretical work in a more creative theoretical political direction, free of dogmatism and sectarianism, should not be underestimated. It deserves wide circulation.

Paul Costello

## Marxism, Africa and Social Class: A Critique of Relevant Theories

by Stephen Katz, Centre for Developing-Area Studies, McGill University, 1980. \$3.50

This important new book provides a critical but popular presentation of some of the advances of Louis Althusser and his school in the field of historical materialism within the context of analyzing African political economy. The author discusses Marxist concepts of social formations, modes of production and class, applying them to sub-Saharan African societies while critiquing non- and neo-Marxist theories of development.

Katz presents the reader with a process of political and theoretical confrontation. He explores the most common theories of Africa's dependency (Wallerstein, Amin, Franks), identifies the weaknesses and contradictions within them and proposes an alternate theoretical system which overcomes these contradictions. This confrontation, however, exists not only on a theoretical plane but within the specific context of African nations, Uganda and Kenya being the most prominent.

The political contributions of this work are not so much a definitive study of African societies but rather a general Marxist orientation towards one of the greatest areas of confusion in non-industrialized countries—social formations and social classes. And although the social formations examined are African, the application of this orientation can also benefit studies of any concrete and historical social formations, and especially Latin American and Asian because of their similar positions and functions in the international capitalist system.

A theory of social classes is crucial for understanding African social formations because of the very nature of political and economic development in Africa. With no single mode of production being clearly dominant, the political, economic and ideological relationships both internal and external to Africa are extremely complex and contradictory.

Is an African nation which is a part of the world capitalist system necessarily a country in which the capitalist mode of production is dominant? Does the world capitalist system have the effect of destroying or preserving (or even expanding) non-capitalist modes of production? If there exists only a minute proletariat does revolutionary class struggle cease to be important? What affects do tribal and ethnic social relations have on class relations? On what basis can a strategy for revolution be developed in these countries if the answers to these questions (and many more not raised here) are unknown? Numerous African leaders have been able to use the ambiguities of this situation to benefit imperialism and local capitalists while simultaneously portraying themselves as revolutionary leaders against imperial domination. Revolutionaries, influenced by the very theories that Katz critiques, have been hampered in many African social formations, from building a popular/national bloc that breaks with capitalism both nationally and internationally.

In developing an understanding of how African social formations function, Katz makes two especially important contributions using concepts from the theoretical framework developed by Althusser and advanced by

Charles Bettelheim and Ernesto Laclau respectively. The first deals with "social formations in which the capitalist mode of production is not directly prominent." The concept, *conservation-dissolution* is key in deciphering the articulation of capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production in any African social formation. This concept, which also has application to the economic, political and ideological development of the post-Civil War South in the US, demonstrates how it is often to the advantage of capitalism to conserve certain pre- or non-capitalist relations of production while dissolving and/or transforming others insofar as they aid the function of capital accumulation. Katz cites Mahmood Mamdani's book *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda* as an important example of applying these concepts to analyse the specificity of capitalist domination in Uganda.

A second vital concept Katz employs concerns the relationship between class struggle and ideology: the people/power bloc contradiction. The role of ideology in African class struggles cannot be underestimated because of the importance of the *national* struggle. Whichever class seeks to determine the manner in which African nationalist sentiment is defined and articulated, does so to develop and protect its own interests. This ideological struggle of classes and other social forces is thus waged (1) amongst subjects (the people) who may have relatively underdeveloped or contradictory class identities, and (2) around the articulation of anti-imperialism and nationalism, ideas which have no inherent class specific content. This ideological struggle is always conducted in the context of the national struggle against the restraints which imperialism imposes upon national development.

There are still other crucial concepts Katz employs in his book. In the chapter "Theories of Modes of Production" Katz elaborates the importance of the articulation (interconnection and interrelationship) of distinct modes of production. Additionally he examines some existing non-capitalist modes and why other so-called modes (the colonial mode, for instance) cannot be justified within a Marxist problematic. Likewise his chapter "Mode(s) of Production and Social Class" contains many necessary conceptual distinctions for theoretical work. He explains (and elaborates) that there are two basic ideas required for a theory of social classes—(1) that class is not determined solely by economic criteria, and (2) specific social classes can only be understood within historical, concrete social formations. This ties in with the fact that a social formation can only make sense to us when the modes of production present in it are articulated in their hierarchy which then structures and reveals the role(s) of different classes.

Since this book was not issued by a well-known publisher, but in a monograph series of a Canadian university, circulation in the US is limited. The effort to get the book, however, will be well worth it. (Available from: Publications, Centre for Developing-Area Studies, McGill University, Macdonald-Harrington Building, 815 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3A 2K6.)

Paul Sanford

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