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Recommended Citation

Ford, D., & Brown, N. (2022). The happy marriage of Afro-pessimism and U.S. universities: Eurocentrism, anti-communism, and an educational recipe for defeat. *Philosophy of Education*, 78(4), 137-151.

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The Happy Marriage of Afro-Pessimism and U.S. Universities: Eurocentrism, Anti-Communism, and an Educational Recipe for Defeat

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We're tasked with educating our students who are increasingly, like teachers, becoming politically conscious and active. The schools and universities in capitalist society are all too ready to accommodate and guide this consciousness and energy into forms it can accommodate. This is neither a simple nor new phenomenon. Charisse Burden-Stelly documents how Black Studies emerged in the 1960s "to fundamentally challenge the statist, imperialist, racist, and Eurocentric underpinnings of the traditional disciplines in westernized universities," but that it was soon "more or less fully incorporated into the westernized university."¹ The erasure of political and economic critique and action with cultural and literary analysis, which "reify the abstraction of Blackness" and divorce it from political struggle, facilitated this absorption.² As we wrestle with political pedagogy, then, our guiding orientation has to resist such subsumption because even the most radical sounding theories can be the most desirable for white supremacy, capitalism, and imperialism.

In educational philosophy, the latest and sexiest theory we have to confront is "Afro-pessimism," which supposedly corrects marxism's "Eurocentrism" and "class reductionism."³ We have to ask, however, why is it that the university — in a white supremacist country — loves Afro-pessimism? In Afro-pessimism, "Blackness cannot be separated from slavery" and "the Slave's relationship to violence is open-ended, gratuitous, without reason or constraint," while "the human's relationship to violence is always contingent."⁴ Frank B. Wilderson III, a full professor at the University of California – Irvine who, in 2020, was named "Chancellor's Professor," is the leading theoretician of Afro-pessimism. His fundamental argument is that "Blacks are not Human

subjects, but are instead structurally inert props, implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures.” As a result, Black people don’t operate “as political subjects,” but rather as a mass of “flesh and energies” that “are instrumentalized for postcolonial, immigrant, feminist, LGBTQ, transgender, and workers’ agendas.”⁵

The fundamental antagonism running throughout the *entirety* of the world is between “the violence of capitalism, gender oppression, and White supremacy” and “the violence of anti-Blackness.”⁶ Because Black people are *a priori* and for all time incapable of political agency, because we are *only* fodder in the apparently separate struggles of other oppressed groups, there is nothing to do except critique. The elision of politics and the complexities of anti-racist struggles and global racial dynamics are not defects but features of Afro-pessimism that align it with white supremacist imperialism. We demonstrate why this is so in order to correct the anti-communist and anti-revolutionary premises on which so much “anti-racist” critique is premised today in educational literature.

HOW AFRO-PESSIMISM REPRODUCES EUROCENTRISM AND ANTI-COMMUNISM

In education, the turn to Afro-pessimism and other related theories of racial oppression are justified by marxism’s “Eurocentrism” and elision of racism; they’re prominent in educational research as (white) scholars, like Clayton Pierce, investigate race and education. We explore and critique several of Pierce’s articles because they’re representative of the problems of this field’s inherent anti-communism and Eurocentrism, not to mention its faulty readings of marxists (including Black marxists). Pierce turns to W.E.B. Du Bois to “correct” these defects and counter marxism’s apparent Eurocentrism and its emphasis “on class formation,” which, apparently, “does not adequately show how capitalism and racism in the United States are coevolutionary partners.”⁷ His argument that Du Bois “moves us away from liberal reform models and European-informed Marxist strategies of resistance,” shows how marxism is based on “a problematic understanding of the human subject supportive of White supremacy and accumulation,” and that marxism leaves “democracy and equity” intact without cleansing them “of their White supremacist and

accumulatory origins,” is dangerously incorrect and premised on misreadings of Du Bois and an active ignorance of the global struggles of the oppressed.⁸ *Black Reconstruction in America* contains, Pierce alleges, “Du Bois’s theory of racial capitalism,” which “is both a critique and advancement of Marx’s Eurocentric and class-based theorization.”⁹ Here, “Du Bois brilliantly reconfigures Marx’s . . . Eurocentric analysis of caste and labor.”¹⁰ As such, “Du Bois’s concept of racial capitalism rewrote the history between slavery and capitalism in the United States” by demonstrating how “slavery and capitalism are not independent or hierarchical to each other but rather co-articulating systems of power integral to the economic and political development of the United States.”¹¹ This was “different from Marx’s understanding of a stage theory of history, where capitalism comes after slave-based economies.”¹²

There are foundational errors here, most notably that Marx held a “stage theory of history.” For Marx, all social formations include various modes of production, and, before the U.S. Civil War, Marx argued that the U.S. represented “the most modern form of existence of bourgeois society,” even though he was keenly aware of the dominant role of the slave mode of production at the time.¹³ Marx’s view of history wasn’t linear or developmental. While Marx sometimes presented history as a progressive development through stages, this was for didactic and not theoretical reasons. *Capital* starts: “The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as an ‘immense accumulation of commodities.’”¹⁴ Capitalism merely *prevails*; it isn’t *exclusive*. Nothing reveals Marx’s temporal openness as his suggestion that surviving communes in nineteenth-century Russia as *progressive* relative to capitalism and “as a possible point of revolutionary resistance.”¹⁵

Second, early on Marx theorized how slavery and capitalism were united in a totality. *The Poverty of Philosophy* advanced the thesis that “direct slavery is the pivot of our industrialism today as much as machinery, credit, etc. Without slavery you have no cotton, without cotton you cannot have modern industry. It is slavery which has given their value to the colonies . . . slavery is an economic category of the highest importance . . . Cause slavery to disappear and you will have wiped America off the map of nations.”¹⁶ Thus, a main reason capitalism was so developed in England at the time Marx wrote *Capital* was because of

“conquest, enslavement, robbery murder,” “the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population,” “the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of [B]lack skins,” and “slavery pure and simple” in the U.S.¹⁷ Marx rejected the idea that this story was *universal* because “to hold that every nation goes through this development internally,” he wrote, “would be as absurd as the idea that every nation is bound to go through the political development of France.”¹⁸

Even if Pierce tried, he couldn’t find a passage in *Reconstruction* critiquing Marx for Eurocentrism. Du Bois critiques white labor movements, some of which called themselves socialist but disobeyed Marx’s directives. Du Bois acknowledges that Marx’s colleague Wedemeyer helped fund the Arbeiterbund, which at one point affirmed that they would “continue to protest most emphatically against both white and [B]lack slavery.”¹⁹ When the group was reconstituted in 1857, it omitted any mention of slavery, but, by then, Weydemeyer had left.²⁰ Most of the workers’ movement at this time took a “hands off” approach to slavery. Lincoln, after his election, met with over two dozen trade unions and “not one of them mentioned slavery or abolition. The only exception,” Frank Chapman notes, was “the German-American Marxists, led by Joseph Weydemeyer,” whose “Communist Club of New York did not hesitate to expel any member who ‘manifested the slightest sympathy’ for the Southern Slaveholders’ Rebellion.”²¹ Historians in fact critiqued Du Bois for understanding the desertion of Black slaves to “the Northern armies as a sort of conscious general strike, as part of a Marxian move against capitalism.”²²

Du Bois approvingly cites Marx in the book, including his 1865 address where “Marx declared boldly: ‘Injustice against a fraction of your people having been followed by such dire consequences, put an end to it. Declare your fellow citizens from this day forth free and equal, without any reserve.’”²³ Burden-Stelly accordingly calls the book “Du Bois’s Black Marxist tome!” “Du Bois’s Black Marxism is manifested in *Black Reconstruction*’s discussion of white workers,” she writes, “that captured both his disillusionment with this group, which led him to advocate separate Black economic cooperation throughout the 1930s, and his later belief that Black and white workers must unite against the ruling class to bring about a socialist future.”²⁴ Pierce here repeats Robinson’s

erroneous claim that Du Bois's training in marxism "proved to be significant but ultimately unsatisfactory."²⁵

Du Bois initially titled one chapter in *Black Reconstruction*, "the dictatorship of the Black proletariat in South Carolina." In a letter to his publisher, he defends the title, noting that "in 1867, there were distinct evidence of a determination on the part of the [B]lack laborers to tax property and administer the state primarily for the benefit of labor."²⁶ The title's important because it "revolutionizes our attitude toward Reconstruction." While it was changed to "the Black proletariat in South Carolina," the book still speaks of the struggle between the dictatorship of capital and of labor. After the Civil War, he laments how the reunited U.S. "delivered the lands into the hands of an organized monarchy of finance while it overthrew the attempt at a dictatorship of labor in the South."²⁷ Du Bois argues that "in the South universal suffrage could not function without personal freedom, land and education, and until these institutions were real and effective, only a benevolent dictatorship in the ultimate interests of labor, Black and white, could establish democracy."²⁸ Reconstruction was a struggle over state power, over how and in whose interests the state would be used, which today teaches us "the relationship between Black freedom and revolution" and allows us to better grasp how to "situate the particular relationship between national oppression and class struggle that is the key to any real revolutionary strategy for change today."²⁹

Marx was a product of his time and place, and we should critique and build on his work, as Marx himself did continuously. It's *how* marxism's built on — through struggle and reflection — that matters. This is what Du Bois did, and it's what led him and so many other Black revolutionaries in the U.S. to join the communist movement, just like oppressed nationalities through Africa, Asia, and Latin America. His marxist development began with the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution when "Du Bois began for the first time... to consider Marxism seriously as a political model."³⁰ After each trip to the Soviet Union, he became increasingly marxist. Again, *Black Reconstruction* "more than any other project embodied and enunciated these ideals."³¹ These marxist principles helped those who adapted the revolutionary guide to action to actually take power — from V.I. Lenin and Mao Tse-Tung to Kim Il Sung and Thomas Sankara. This

is why Ho Chi Minh, when he first “read the Communist International’s thesis on national and colonial issues... wept:” because “it was a ‘miraculous guide’ for the struggle of the people of Indo-China.”³²

THE NATIONAL QUESTION AND THE INTERNATIONALIST
STRUGGLE AGAINST WHITE SUPREMACY AND CAPITALIST
IMPERIALISM

Revolutionaries worldwide developed marxism *because* it was so open. As Kim Il Sung said, “Marxism-Leninism is not a dogma; it is a guide to action and a creative theory. So, Marxism-Leninism can display its indestructible vitality only when it is applied creatively to suit the specific conditions of each country.”³³ To critique marxism as Eurocentric *is* Eurocentric, for it denies the agency and inspiring achievements of liberation struggles that have fought to and even successfully overthrown colonialism and capitalism. Even when Pauline Lipman celebrates that “revolutionaries in Europe, Russia, China, Vietnam, Cuba, Southern Africa, and now Latin America revised and extended Marx’s thought in relation to their own conditions,” she nowhere mentions them or their theories!³⁴

What is most revealing about academic marxist literature in education is the omission of national oppression and national liberation, as these forged the theoretical and practical link between the struggles of all oppressed peoples. The question of national liberation can be found in Marx, who not only supported anti-colonial uprisings in India and China but even said that they might ignite the revolution in Britain. “It may seem a very strange, and very paradoxical assertion,” Marx wrote about the 1850-53 Taiping Rebellion in China, “that the next uprising of the people of Europe, and their next movement for republican freedom and economy of government, may depend more probably on what is now passing in the Celestial Empire.”³⁵ The uprisings of the colonized could be the *sparks* for revolutionary opportunities by the proletariat in the colonizing country!

Marx fought against racism and national chauvinism as he experienced the deep-seated racism of English workers against the Irish. He “argued that an English workers party, representing workers from an oppressor nation, had the duty to support an oppressed nation’s self-determination and independence” and

that “English workers could never attain liberation as long as the Irish continued to be oppressed.”³⁶ Marx organized British workers to support the abolitionist struggle by galvanizing them to oppose a British intervention in the U.S. Civil War on behalf of the slaveocracy, an intervention that, because Britain had the largest Navy in the world, could have altered the war drastically and that, in the face of overwhelming propaganda, faced steep odds from the start.³⁷ Lenin built on this to develop the principle that guided the world’s socialist and liberation movements, which put Indigenous governments in power and didn’t occur in Europe but in Korea and China, Cuba and Nicaragua, Ghana and Ethiopia. Lenin summarizes the marxist position: “Complete equality of rights for all nations; the right of nations to self-determination; the unity of the workers of all nations — such is the national programme that Marxism, the experience of the whole world, and the experience of Russia, teaches the workers.”³⁸

Black revolutionary activity was strongest in the U.S. between the two World Wars after the Third International (Comintern) adopted the “Black Belt” Thesis in 1928. Harry Haywood recalls that, “though Stalin was undoubtedly the person pushing the position at the time, it had not originated with him, but with Lenin himself,” who in 1920 proposed that communists “render direct aid to the revolutionary movements among the dependent and underprivileged nations (for example, Ireland, the American Negroes, Etc.) and in the colonies.”³⁹ The U.S. is a state imprisoning an oppressed Black nation. It isn’t a matter of race because to call it such is “to fall into the bourgeois liberal trap of regarding the fight for equality as primarily a fight against racial prejudices of the whites. This slurred over the economic and social roots of the question.”⁴⁰ Black people constitute a nation as they are “set apart by a common ethnic origin, economically interrelated in various classes, united by a common historical experience, reflected in a special culture and psychological makeup”⁴¹

Black people have the right to self-determination, and it became the duty of *all* communists to fight for this. Fighting for the rights of oppressed nations to self-determination let communists attend to the super oppression and exploitation of some groups and to how the bourgeoisie could extract even more surplus from them. It was also intended to combat the racism and national chauvinism engrained in U.S. and other workers and to win large sec-

tors of society — and the world — to their program. During the 1920s-1940s, the Communist Party USA recruited and organized Black leadership across the country, fighting for the Scottsboro Boys, setting up the American Negro Labor Council, and more. Black radicals and intellectuals were increasingly attracted to Bolshevism and the Soviet Union, if only because of their unflinching support for anti-colonial struggles and for the struggles for self-determination.⁴² In 1940, the Party's rights and duties guidelines included the following line: "It shall be the duty of the Party members to struggle against the national oppression of the Negro people; to fight for complete equality for Negroes in all phases of American life and to promote the unity of Negro and white toilers for the advancement of their common interests."⁴³ This was the same time the U.S. withheld Du Bois' passport so he couldn't organize internationally.

THE HAPPY MARRIAGE OF WHITE ACADEMIC RADICALS AND AFRO-PESSIMISM

Rather than a transhistorical and abstract ontological libidinal drive, anti-Blackness must be grasped by its relation to "antiradicalism, defined as the disciplining of communists, socialists, and other radicals."⁴⁴ When anti-Blackness is decoupled from politics — as it is in Afro-pessimism — white supremacy, capitalism, and imperialism are perfectly willing to accommodate and even promote it! It's an ontic Blackness, not a political Blackness like what Walter Rodney articulated for the West Indies.⁴⁵ As Assata Shakur recalls, she was skeptical of communism "as some kind of white man's concoction" before she "read works by African revolutionaries and studied the African liberation movements," which "understood that the question of African liberation was not just a question of race," and that, "if they didn't rid themselves of the capitalistic economic structure, the white colonialists would simply be replaced by Black neocolonialists."⁴⁶

Theorists who use "Blackness" as a universal category similarly erase how all oppressed groups "comprise various classes and social groupings with conflicting interests, tendencies and motives."⁴⁷ The Black bourgeoisie sometimes struggled against white oppressors but mostly "tend[ed] toward compromise and accommodation."⁴⁸ Asad Haider identifies how the same question arose when, in the midst of a mass and militant anti-racist movement led by Black people,

Afro-pessimism worked to defang the movement. “A fundamental symptom of this trend,” he notes, “was the proliferation of the term *antiblackness* in the place of *racism*” because the former term creates the irremediable antagonism whereby Blackness has no political agency or cause.⁴⁹ It allowed Black leaders like Teach for America’s Saint Louis executive director to emerge as spokespeople for the movement.

Afro-pessimism fundamentally misreads Marx, alleging that “racism is read off the base, as it were, as being derivative of political economy.”⁵⁰ While there’s a history of some marxist groupings asserting “class first” politics, Marx, Engels, Lenin, and the international communist movement always maintained the primacy of race and the imbrication of national and racist terror in capitalism. In 1894, Engels wrote “economic conditions... ultimately determines historical development. But race itself is an economic factor.”⁵¹ Race is part of the base, yet it’s superstructural in that (1) race is a historically constructed and evolving category and (2) it’s maintained and ordered by economic forces and social relations.⁵² Afro-pessimism is *Eurocentric* in that Africa and Africans are flattened into “Blackness” as a condition of the “human.” This is “the [B] lackness and humanism of white Americanism, specifically and restrictively, an isolationist or exceptionalist Americanism,” as Greg Thomas demonstrates.⁵³

Afro-pessimism’s problem is that, for Marx, race is dynamic, contingent, and political rather than a fixed and abstract ontological category. Pierce upholds the latter when he says the “primary function of the slave caste system and its transition into the Black codes of the Jim Crow era was to legally and socially bind African Americans into a racially distinct labor group.”⁵⁴ If they did produce Black people as particular kinds of laborers, they did so differently because of capital’s changing dynamics. Eugene Puryear explains this in his critique of “The New Jim Crow:”

White supremacy and racism are not floating in the air as independent and anonymous forces with the power to restructure society. They operate in tandem with, and ultimately are subservient to, the evolving capitalist economic structure. Thus, slavery was not just racial oppression, but a system based around a particular form of labor super-exploitation. Jim Crow, too, was

designed and continuously redesigned to secure and suppress Black labor in the region's planter-dominated agriculture and low-wage industries.⁵⁵

Mass incarceration is distinct as it is (1) “a political and state response to the masses of Black people being thrown out of the productive process altogether” whereas Jim Crow was organized to *keep* Black people working; (2) mass incarceration impacts “poor and working-class Black communities much more severely than middle- and upper-class individuals,” while Jim Crow impacted Black people regardless of class; and (3) while Jim Crow was organized to suppress the enfranchisement of Black people writ large, mass incarceration “does not require the wholesale elimination of Black political participation.”⁵⁶ Mass incarceration arose in part in response to the militant, *multinational*, and dominantly *marxist* liberation movements in the 60s-70s and in “a phase of high-tech and neoliberal capitalism.”⁵⁷

FOR A *POLITICS* OF BLACK LIBERATION, CLASS STRUGGLE, AND ANTI-IMPERIALISM

Scholars, including white scholars, producing anti-racist literature are misguided by the liberal framework of race theories that elide the question of *politics*. We jump on the freshest and most radical theories, which negatively impacts people's movements. Examples of Afro-pessimism's “anti-Blackness” that often come up in organizing are that non-Black people of color are to be met with suspicion when organizing on issues that sharply affect Black people, like immigration. In the struggle for immigrant rights, which is often overcoded as a “Latinx issue,” some Black activists and organizers point to the fact that 44 percent of those caged by the state are Haitians. Instead of directing their ire towards the racist state, the focus becomes the irrevocable anti-Blackness that exists in Latinx communities. Afro-pessimism has working-class people of color (Black people included) fighting amongst each other instead of building a united front against the racist state. Capital, then, is let off the hook. The problem is the “anti-Blackness”— and the “inherent” anti-Blackness — of non-Black communities. It's a structural feature of society, but apparently one that can't be changed.

The vague calls to “follow Black people” not only fulfill racist tropes that all Black people are a single homogenous group but, moreover, let white people off the hook for doing any real political investigation and organizing. The response to “Follow Black people” is: “Which Black people?” Should Derek follow his comrade Nino or John McWhorter? Should he get his racial politics from Barack Obama or Glen Ford? Such *political* questions are eclipsed. Black people have and will lead the Black struggle and the class struggle. So will Asian Americans, Indigenous peoples, and Latino/a/xs, the children of African immigrants and Filipino domestic workers. So too will white people. The key ingredients are *unity*, *political clarity*, and *strategic proficiency*, necessary risks because (1) politics draws lines between friends and enemies and (2) unity and strategic clarity are extraordinarily difficult. Educators who are or want to be radical have no choice but to accept this risk by rooting ourselves in movements and resisting incorporation into neoliberalism. We choose to struggle to unite with those who imperialism and white supremacy segregates us from so we can build a revolutionary movement.

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2 Burden-Stelly, “Black Studies in the Westernized University,” 74.

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5 Wilderson, *Afro-pessimism*, 15.

6 Wilderson, 228.

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- 10 Pierce, 30.
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- 14 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy (Vol. 1): A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, trans. S. Moore and E. Aveling (1867; rpt. New York: International Publishers, 1967), 43.
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