

The Relevance of the Enlightenment

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CYNTHIA YOUNG'S COMMENT on my book *Social Decay and Transformation: A View from the Left* (ATC 97) [see below] presents legitimate disagreements and criticisms. It also includes some distortions of my views, however, particularly when it amalgamates my point of view with those of authors with whom I sharply disagree.

Samuel Farber

Legacy of the Enlightenment

Professor Young is correct in pointing out the racist elements found among Enlightenment thinkers. I can add some additional problems of Enlightenment thought, such as its individualistic tendencies and naïve belief that education by itself, was the panacea for the radical improvement of the human condition.

This in turn, is related to the general Enlightenment political approach in seeing improvement coming from above, instead of from below.

On balance, however, the Enlightenment constituted a huge step forward for humanity. It helped to fundamentally break the stranglehold of medieval and ecclesiastical obscurantism and the formidable barriers to rational and scientific thought.

It made the revolutionary assertion of the universal equality of everyone, against the previously dominant assumption of natural hierarchy.

In doing so, the Enlightenment was by no means totally freed of those older modes of thought. Yet the Enlightenment also constituted the basis for new ideas and practices that transcended it, in

search of a higher rationality, in the context of a working class emancipatory struggle from below against the nineteenth-century capitalist juggernaut.

Classical Marxism primarily drew from three sources: British political economy, German philosophy and French revolutionary politics. Each one of those three sources was profoundly rooted in the Enlightenment tradition.

That doesn't mean that classical Marxism was entirely free of flaws such as a certain degree of ethnocentrism. However, to develop an overall characterization of either Marxism or the Enlightenment on the basis of these flaws and limitations is to grossly caricature these traditions instead of seriously studying them in a critical spirit.

Enlightenment and Revolutionaries

It is therefore easy to understand why the Bolshevik revolutionaries, in the early revolutionary period, had no problem naming the Commissariat of Education as the Commissariat of Enlightenment.

In my country, practically all of the leaders of the Cuban struggle for independence identified with the traditions of the Enlightenment, as witnessed by their usual membership in Masonic lodges (which had a substantially different political content than Free Masonry in the United States).

The same was true for Cuban Black leaders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such as Antonio Maceo, Juan Gualberto Gomez and Evaristo Estenoz, the leader of the Partido Independiente de Color, the Cuban Black Party that was brutally suppressed in 1912. These three Cuban Black leaders did not have the same positions on the question of race, but were all nonetheless well within the Enlightenment political tradition.

In this context, I think it is wrong to say, as Professor Young does, that the Haitian revolutionaries of the early nineteenth century "successfully wield[ed] the Master's tools against him," as if the Haitian leaders' adoption of the Enlightenment tradition was merely a tactical ploy, and not an authentic expression of their own worldview.

Toussaint himself was inspired by the radical anti-slavery Enlightenment writer Abbe Raynal. The race and nationality of the Haitian leaders did not preclude their sharing a political philosophy that originated in Europe. As C.L.R. James makes clear, Enlightenment thinkers such as Diderot and the Encyclopedists themselves attacked slavery; many of them formed the Friends of the Negro to agitate for abolition.

In February 1794, the Jacobin National Convention, in obedience to Enlightenment egalitarian and democratic ideals, as well as the Parisian masses upon whom it depended, responded positively to the appeal made by the Haitian revolutionaries whom it invited to address it and became the first in the modern age to abolish slavery. This is not to say that the Haitian slaves could count on anyone but themselves to free them; the opposite was the case.

The Western Anti-Enlightenment Tradition

There has been a longstanding tendency among important sections of the left to develop a looking-backwards approach to the Enlightenment, and more broadly to capitalism itself, instead of posing a modern, forward looking, working-class based alternative to capitalism.

As I explained in detail in my first and, in many ways, my most important chapter titled "Social Decay and the Left," which isn't discussed in Professor Young's comment, in the nineteenth century the opposition to capitalism often took the form of a glorification of the Middle Ages.

This frequently ignored the unspeakable daily brutality, and the extremely harsh class oppression of medieval society. Such left-medievalism often expressed itself as an opposition to the city and modern life and as an uncritical praise of community, ignoring the authoritarianism and oppression that communities have often entailed.

Similarly, in recent years the Enlightenment has been attacked from perspectives based on antirationalist and irrationalist currents, historically associated with the political right as in the case of the aristocratic elitism of Frederick Nietzsche.

"Western thought" has often been exclusively identified with the Enlightenment. Nothing could be further from the truth. Western thought has historically been characterized as much by anti-Enlightenment, anti-rationalist thought, as by an Enlightenment tradition broadly identified with one or another form of rationalism.

Many who claim to oppose the Western intellectual tradition by attacking the Enlightenment are doing so from the perspective of other, often reactionary, Western intellectual traditions. This is also the case of many contemporary analysts of modernity who, instead of engaging in the necessary and useful critique of the social organization of science and the uses of technology, have attacked science as such (leading to the kind of charlatanism and obscurantism of the journal "Social Text" exposed by Alan Sokal).

For all these reasons, given the nature and sources of the present attacks on the Enlightenment, it is necessary to affirm it, notwithstanding its obvious negative aspects and limitations.

This is no different from defending the legacy of the French Revolution against its revisionist right-wing critics, even though Marxists such as Rosa Luxemburg had many good criticisms to make of Jacobinism and the French revolutionary tradition.

The same applies to current French governmental efforts to limit the rights of those born in France if their parents happen to be of foreign origin, which constitutes a direct repudiation of the French revolutionary idea that citizenship should be based on place of birth and not on "blood" ties.

My Criticism of Kelley

Suppose somebody was writing a book on the relationship between Leninism and Stalinism and had a section or chapter criticizing my views on the matter as put forward in my book *Before Stalinism*. Is that person obliged to also discuss my views on the Cuban Revolution, let alone those expressed in *Social Decay and Transformation*?

I think not. Thus, I am not persuaded by Professor Young's criticism that my criticism of Robin D.G. Kelley's *Race Rebels* did not discuss other aspects of Kelley's work.

Professor Young also asserts that I criticize Kelley because he is a postmodernist. The problem is that such a criticism of Kelley is nowhere to be found in my book, for the simple reason that I don't believe Robin Kelley is a postmodernist.

My criticism of Kelley is not even about *Race Rebels* as a whole, but about those parts of the book

relevant to the issues treated in my book. In fact, I wrote almost a whole page (114) praising various positive aspects of this book.

My criticism is about one major and important feature of Kelley's *Race Rebels*, namely its pronounced "romanticism," which I describe as a tendency to idealize the behavior of oppressed groups, to perceive resistance and politics where they do not exist, and to convert mundane if not altogether negative things into admirable behavior.

I also added that this tendency is likely to thrive when the left is not doing well and there is a strong temptation to create good news at any price. (124) This aspect of Kelley's thinking is directly pertinent to a major theme of my book that discusses how the left has historically addressed issues of social decay.

What is Resistance?

Specifically, I do take Robin Kelley to task for his unwitting trivializing of resistance. If pretty much everything the oppressed do is resistance, then it follows that no action the oppressed take is any more or less important than anything else they do.

Kelley could have avoided this problem had he followed his own favorable mention of what Raymond Williams called "alternative behavior," as distinct from oppositional or resistance activity. A good example of Williams' "alternative behavior is prostitution, which Kelley instead sees as "potentially empowering."

Kelley's description of the "hipster" behavior of African-American "zoot-suiters" in the forties also seems a lot closer to Williams' "alternative" category than to the "oppositional" behavior that Kelley attributes to it.

Kelley's approach is flawed not only because it distorts the historical truth, but also because of its practical political implications. If we do not at least attempt to distinguish what is resistance and whether it has a smaller or greater political character, then we are left without concrete guidelines for social and political action.

Such guidelines depend on reading as accurately as possible where oppressed people are at, in terms of their consciousness and even more important their willingness and readiness to fight back against their oppressors.

This is politically very important. In my own political and organizational experience, especially in the period from the late sixties to the late seventies, one of the important factors in demoralizing and driving seasoned left cadre to the right, or out of politics altogether, was the complete misreading of the radical possibilities in that period and the totally unrealistic expectations for radicalization of the American working class.

Thus, this is not an issue of dogmatic hair-splitting, pedantic academicism or of arrogant Marxists appropriating for themselves the right to grant the title of radical or revolutionary to the type of actions they prefer. We are talking instead about the maximum political clarity to guide our political orientation and action.

This is particularly important for those who live inside the United States, the most powerful capitalist country in the world.

Looking At Malcolm X

Nothing demonstrates more clearly my objections to Kelley's romanticism than Kelley's critique of Malcolm X (this important issue is again not discussed by Professor Young).

Kelley criticizes Malcolm's account of his hustling teenage years as "a cliché that obscures more than it reveals." Kelley further criticizes Malcolm for "the sort of narrow, rigid criteria" that the latter used to judge the political meaning of his life.

Consistent with Kelley's tendency to see opposition and resistance in acts that are, as I pointed out before, part of what Raymond Williams called "alternative behavior," Kelley objects to Malcolm's failure to perceive "the zoot suit, the conk, the lindy hop, and the language of the hep cat' [as] signifiers of a culture of opposition among black, mostly male, youth." Malcolm's pride in having left the life of victimizing crime to fully dedicate himself to the liberation of his people is seen by Kelley as Malcolm being "ill-equipped to capture the significance of his youthful struggles to carve more time for leisure and pleasure, free himself from alienating wage labor, survive and transcend the racial and economic boundaries he confronted in everyday life." (Robin D.G. Kelley, {Race Rebels. Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class}, New York: The Free Press, 1994; 162, 179) But what were the politics of what Malcolm was actually saying in his {Autobiography}? He was suggesting that as he became a politically and socially conscious Black leader, and particularly after he left the Nation of Islam, his life had acquired a constructive goal and purpose and was thus a big advance over his previous life of crime. It is worth emphasizing that Malcolm's abandonment of his frequently exploitative hustling was not geared at all towards "respectability" and social mobility. Malcolm's contempt for middle class Black careerists was legendary. Instead, all his efforts toward self-mastery and self-control were guided by the goal of how to best serve the cause of the liberation of his people. As Malcolm overcame and grew out of his hustling and delinquent past, he felt no need to either idealize or express contempt for that past. He would not look down on those African-Americans who continued to live the way he used to. Unlike many upper- and middle-class reformers, he wanted to win over those sisters and brothers to a better way, not to condemn them from on high. Malcolm's finely honed moral and political sense also made it easy for him to discriminate among the various behaviors that mainstream society included under the all-inclusive, grab bag category of crime. While it goes without saying that Malcolm would have no truck with drug pushers and muggers preying on the community, he attacked those who characterized looting by Black working people as criminal acts, as in mainstream press coverage of the 1964 Harlem riots. {{{Class and Temperance}}} Malcolm's approach was the same one that radical working-class leaders have historically adopted towards the problems of social decay affecting their communities. As I clearly pointed out in my chapter on alcoholism and temperance, what distinguished working class movements from middle and upper class reformers was not that working-class movements approved or were indifferent to the alcoholism affecting working-class communities. There was more to temperance movements than just opposition to alcoholic addiction. This opposition sometimes had a primarily upper- and middle-class ideological character, as was usually the case with single-issue temperance movements; but sometimes it had a primarily working-class

character. In this latter case, there were varying motivations for working-class temperance and conflicting ideological and political approaches to the issue. The key issue in these movements, as I emphasized in my book, was the distinction between the desire for middle-class respectability, which predominated in the upper- and middle-class movements, and the drive for workers' dignity, pride and class independence which predominated in the working-class temperance movements. On a more ideological level, as I pointed out in my book, was the crucial question that often distinguished working class from other analyses of temperance, of whether alcoholism was seen as the cause or the result of working-class oppression, and whether abstinence by itself could solve the problem of workers. Middle- and upper-class reformers typically thought it would, while progressive workers movements typically thought it would not. {{{Argument vs. Amalgamation}}} The views expressed in my book were clearly identified with, and supported, the approaches taken by radical working class movements and by Malcolm X. In fact, I referred to {The Autobiography} of Malcolm X as a work in the best of Enlightenment traditions. Unfortunately Professor Young instead identifies my views with those put forward by Cornel West, and by conservative NAACP leaders, which can be considered as varieties of “blaming the victims” analyses. Yet I explicitly criticized Cornel West and his co-author Sylvia Ann Hewlett (90), for the same kind of reasons that Professor Young finds objectionable in West's approach to the Black community. This is an instance of amalgamation, in which Professor Young attributes to me views that I clearly don't have, but that are widely rejected by the audience being addressed. Nowhere do I assert that their “deficient” manners and morals impair the working class from throwing off their own shackles,’ a formulation that clearly suggests a “blaming the victim” approach.

With no claim whatsoever to originality, I affirm that class oppression and exploitation may lead to a process of atomization of the oppressed, and that this expresses itself in a variety of ways such as large-scale drug addiction, alcoholism, and many other ills that often constitute obstacles to self-organization and emancipation.

My analysis also shows that such processes don't take place if the affected class or community actively organizes itself into unions, parties and community organizations.

Toward Self-Transformation

My book is not primarily concerned with the working class, or Black communities, but with the ideas and practices of what E. P. Thompson called the “politically active minority” within those communities.

In particular, I ask whether these politically active minorities are pointing toward the possibilities of people transforming themselves as they transform society — the case of nineteenth- and twentieth-century radical working-class leaders and of Malcolm X, particularly in his post-NOI period — or whether they idealize the negative and self-destructive behavior inevitably encouraged by exploitation and oppression.

Samuel Farber

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A Critical Look at Social Decay and Transformation

— Cynthia Young

"Cultural Work Ain't All Arts and Leisure"(1)

SAMUEL FARBER'S SOCIAL Decay and Transformation sets itself an important task, namely to assess the impact of rising school violence, murder, drug use and other social ills on working-class political mobilization. Instead of taking such problems as central to their political theory and praxis, leftists, Farber contends, have too often ceded an analysis of social problems to the right who are only too happy to celebrate the workings of a free market that precipitates social decay, while blaming that decay on the left's penchant for moral relativism.

Arguing for a return to a "global critique of the system, indeed a grand narrative'" that will connect social ills to their structural origins and offer tools for social transformation, Farber sets out to historically situate left responses to such social problems as incivility, alcoholism, and a decline in volunteerism. (Farber 2000, xvii) In bolstering his argument that leftists need to recognize social decay as a counter-productive response to class exploitation, Farber analyzes the Black Panther Party's approach to the lumpen question, and the recent work of Robin D.G. Kelley and James C. Scott, whom he sees as wrongheaded in their approach to, and reading of, resistance and political transformation. He then concludes with an examination of the Russian Revolution during the 1920s, for him an example of how cultural revolution can be effectively used to combat social decay. Farber's project is grounded in a critique of Postmodernism, which he characterizes as subject to irrationality and extreme cultural relativism. Postmodernism, suggests Farber, has unduly influenced the left, diverting attention from the urgent problems of social decay and political transformation. While one might agree that this description fits some elements of both the left and Postmodernism, such a sweeping assessment treats these as if they were settled, undifferentiated entities, rather than contested intellectual and political fields. After all, as David Finkel reminds us in his New Politics review, "For the broad public, the left' means anything from Al Gore leftward." (Finkel 2001, 186)

Though Farber's imprecision risks caricaturing Postmodernism in much the same way that the right does, I am not interested in defending Postmodernism here. Instead I'd like to focus on the left Farber imagines himself to be both criticizing and addressing, the left that in his estimation "has turned to something labeled culture' as an area where through verbal sleights of hand they can declare a victory that has little meaning beyond intellectual reviews and academic departments and journals." (Farber, 2000, xviii) It is this "cultural left" who have raised Farber's ire, but not for the usual reasons. To be clear, Farber is not directly attacking identity politics and the women, gays, or people of color who too often become the "whipping boys" for former New Leftists. In fact, he unequivocally states that "it is vitally important to defend the egalitarian legacy of the sixties' as expressed in the black,

women's and gay liberation movements." (Farber 2000, xi)

At the same time, however, he is suspicious of the turn to culture, wondering what it sacrifices in terms of critical analysis. Does the turn to cultural politics necessarily involve a descent into political romanticism, Farber asks?

Romanticizing the Enlightenment

Since it would be impossible to do justice to Farber's argument in the space remaining, I'd like to focus on two central elements.

For one, his hope for democratic progress and societal transformation is grounded in an investment in the Enlightenment, Modernism more specifically. Given that the Enlightenment bequeathed to us the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism, I am wary of its utility in addressing pressing social issues, particularly those structured by race.

Secondly, I think Farber fundamentally misreads Robin D.G. Kelley's work on subaltern resistance, miscasting him as a Postmodernist and seriously underestimating his work's importance to the left's political and intellectual projects.

Because Farber only concentrates on one of Kelley's books, *Race Rebels*, he fails to engage with later work such as *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!* that compellingly addresses the ways in which culture, social decay and the state are interrelated.

Both of these tendencies speak to a central weakness in Farber's analysis. Though he is obviously attuned to issues of race and racism, he fails to fully address the complex articulation between racial difference, capitalism and (narratives of) social dysfunction.

Consequently, *Social Decay and Transformation* risks lapsing back into a romantic investment in the Enlightenment and an overly dichotomous view of culture vs. politics that does not offer us enough tools to address working-class life in the 21st century.

Though Farber repeatedly references the Enlightenment and Modernity in his analysis, he does not acknowledge the extent to which narratives of "social decay" and its obverse "enlightenment" have historically depended upon the creation and juxtaposition of the "white" and the "non-white" body.

Following Richard Gilman, Farber defines social decay as "a backward movement or sterile arrest, the mulling over and taking to the self materials and actions that have been surpassed or left behind by society." He continues, "In particular, I am concerned with a regress from the democratic, egalitarian and humanist elements of modernism." (Farber 2000, xv)

On the face of it, it is impossible to disagree with Farber's point; of course, democracy and egalitarianism are values worth championing. However, Farber's linkage of these traits to the Enlightenment is extremely problematic.

For one, the very fabric of Modernity was built upon ideologies of racial inferiority grounded in ideas about the body, the senses and the psyche of the Other.

There is no divorcing Enlightenment's theory from its praxis, particularly since the theory has been used throughout the last 500+ years to dehumanize, objectify, enslave and otherwise exploit non-Western peoples. To put it mildly, the term is neither ideologically innocent nor value-neutral.

Whether he intends it to or not, Farber's suggestion that social decay bespeaks a return to premodernity also presents some difficulties. As recent scholarship shows, regimes of European imperialism, colonialism and enslavement produced and depended upon the scientifically rational disciplines of philosophy, history and anthropology (among others) to invent the "non-white" as "premodern" and "primitive" juxtaposed, of course, to the "modern" white subject.(2)

Race was literally defined in visual and spatio-temporal terms, an embodied entity that could be plotted on a map and charted on a timeline. As Howard Winant writes in his new book, *The World is a Ghetto*, "Modernity itself was among other things a worldwide racial project, an evolving and flexible process of racial formation, of structuration and signification of race" (Winant, 2001, 30).

This fact makes us, people of color, wary of terms like "civilization," "rationality" and "social decay" precisely because they have depended upon the present, non-white Other for their legitimation. Enlightenment discourse has been so thoroughly contaminated by racial taxonomies that it is difficult to use the term in any non-racialized way.

The Modernity of the Oppressed

By raising these objections, I do not mean to suggest that racialized peoples have rejected wholesale all of the ideals associated with Modernity. C.L.R. James' brilliant account of the Haitian Revolution in *The Black Jacobins* demonstrates exactly the opposite, namely that enslaved and colonized peoples can successfully wield the Master's tools against him.

As the Haitian Revolution unfolded, French Republicans felt their cries of "liberté, fraternité and égalité" boomerang back at them as events in San Domingo revealed the hypocrisy of Republicans championing democratic values, while endorsing slavery and colonialism.

When Toussaint L'Ouverture demanded that democratic rights be extended to non-white slaves, he stretched Enlightenment ideals beyond their original intent, creating an alternative origin point for Modernity, one that radically shifted the ground upon which Europeans had founded it. (James 1989)

Perhaps this is what Farber means when he argues that critics have taken Modernity "for granted as [if] it were completely established and consolidated." (Farber 2000, xv) If so, then we might begin to look for alternate Modernities in places where we have previously overlooked them, rather than uncritically reviving Enlightenment discourse.

A "Nihilist" Threat?

Farber's discussion of social decay also resonates with some of the last decade's vicious sparring between leftists and liberals on questions of Black working-class behavior and values. The heated debates between William Julius Wilson and Adolph Reed Jr. over Wilson's "culture of poverty" thesis, or those between Cornell West and Stephen Steinberg over West's assertions of "black nihilism," are only two prominent examples.

In fact, West directly echoes Farber's critique, bemoaning in *Race Matters* the fact that "liberal structuralists overlook the nihilistic threat [to black America]." (West 1993, 13) Despite his explicit wish to avoid doing so, Farber, like Wilson and West, risks shifting the focus from the structural causes of class and race oppression to the values, manners and morals of the oppressed.

Drunkenness, civic apathy, impoliteness once again fuel social inequity, rather than the other way

around, but with a peculiar twist. If the right blames the working class and its “deficient” manners and morals for their substandard housing, education and income, Farber seems to suggest that their “deficient” manners and morals impair the working class from throwing off their own shackles.

In other words, “social decay” hinders class solidarity and mobilization. By this logic, the working class is at fault for its inability to pull itself up by its revolutionary bootstraps.

Acknowledgement of the Enlightenment’s perverse legacy might also lead us to think differently about cultural identities; it might cause us to see them as absolutely central to political mobilization and empowerment precisely because the Enlightenment thoroughly denigrated non-Western ways of being and knowing.

This does not mean that we should assume that there is absolutely no difference between cultural politics and other forms of politics (e.g. electoral or grassroots). Nor does it mean that we ought to privilege cultural politics as the best or only form of politics available to us — an assumption Farber seems to attribute to cultural historians on the left.

It does, however, mean that undoing the history of race and racism depends upon understanding the relationship between identity, culture and politics in ways that go far beyond the analysis given to us by Farber.

Misreading Robin Kelley

I have thus far argued that Farber’s dependence upon the Enlightenment and notions of “social decay” as the ground for his critique disables the production of a generative theoretical and political space in which new forms of organizing can flourish.

Similarly, it hampers his reading of cultural politics, particularly as it is explored in the work of Robin D.G. Kelley. By considering only *Race Rebels*, Farber ignores the fact that Kelley’s other work, particularly *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!*, provides multiple entryways into a discussion of Black resistance and local empowerment.

Faulting what he sees as “political romanticism,” Farber accuses Kelley of claiming equivalence between such activities as CIO meetings and dances in an attempt to demonstrate the ways in which the personal is also the political.

Central to Farber’s critique is his dismissal of Kelley’s assertion that sex work, under some circumstances, has provided Black women a measure of autonomy and agency absent from other labor realms such as that of domestic work. Kelley, says Farber, “idealiz[es] behavior which is in fact far more dehumanizing than anything that could remotely be considered resistance.” (Farber 2000, 119)

Instead, Farber argues, an action can only qualify as a resistant political act if it possesses certain features. In the realm of ideology, these include a clear set of goals, analysis of the sources and causes of oppression and possible solutions, and a structural analysis that links one’s immediate oppressor to a larger chain of oppressors.

In the organizational realm, these include self-organization, clear goals, and the ability to distinguish between short-term and long-term strategies and tactics. (Farber 2000, 116)

Again, Farber’s criteria seem as good a place as any to start, but determining which of these is

present and whether in sufficient number to qualify an act as resistant seems an impossible task. What yardstick should we use? Would the poisoning of one's slave master or the drowning of one's enslaved infant count, even if not motivated by a deep structural critique and unrelated to a larger slave revolt?

These are not easy questions to answer, nor am I convinced that such hairsplitting is necessary. In fact, one of the most useful elements of Kelley's work is his consistent foregrounding of the contradictory elements within alternative and oppositional practices.

Farber's assessment misreads the utility of Kelley's perspective altogether. Worse still, he underestimates the way racism and misogyny critically impact the modes of resistance that are possible in any given situation from enslavement to de facto segregation.

It is not that Kelley makes no distinction between attending a union meeting, dancing at the Savoy, or turning a trick; rather his work highlights the ways in which white supremacy forces Black men and women (not to mention other people of color) to craft and inhabit alternative and sometimes oppositional spaces made to suit their circumstances.

Survival as Resistance

As John Clarke, Stuart Hall and others write, "The subordinate class brings to [the] theater of struggle' a repertoire of strategies and responses [that mobilize] certain real material and social elements: it constructs these into the support for the different ways the class lives and resists its continuing subordination." (Clarke 1976, 44) Survival is a form of resistance in a structural context hostile to one's very existence. Recognizing this does not mean equating survival with class warfare; rather, it means understanding that working-class "coping" strategies may mark or even open up other spaces for resistance. More importantly, as the authors remind us: {"We must also recognize that a developed and organized revolutionary working-class consciousness is only one [one is italicized in original text] among many such possible responses, and a very special ruptural one at that. It has been misleading to try to measure the whole spectrum of strategies in the class in terms of this one ascribed form of consciousness, and to define everything else as a token of incorporation. This is to impose an abstract scheme on to a concrete historical reality."} (Clarke 1976, 45) As intellectuals and organizers, we need to admit that oppositional politics in the here and now may not look as it has in the past. Otherwise, as Clarke and Hall warn, we are simply forcing a historically specific working class into an abstract theoretical schema. To acknowledge that resistance exists in marginal places and compromised ways is not to settle for whatever may come; rather it is a way of acknowledging that even alternative practices provide us with important tools for our oppositional politics. This point is emphasized in Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! during Kelley's exploration of how Black youth translate hip hop labor into cold, hard cash. His analysis makes it abundantly clear that the ability of Black youth to profit from their cultural labor does not necessarily "undermine capitalism" even as it poses an alternative to mind-numbing, minimum wage labor. On the other hand, some hip hop commodities do pose a significant ideological challenge to late capitalism even as its producers are forced to labor in the shadow of global

capital. (Kelley 1997, 43-77) One useful example of the multiple negotiations hip hop artists make is the case of rapper Mos Def, whose 1999 "Black on Both Sides" was easily one of the most musically challenging and politically trenchant albums of the decade. The same rapper whose songs skillfully blend anti-capitalist critique, shrewd appraisals of racism's impact and paeans to his enslaved ancestors also co-starred in MTV's "hipopera" Carmen. {{{Defining Resistance}}} To dismiss such contradictory projects as the result of faulty analysis or short-term strategy is to miss the point entirely. Call it a Faustian bargain, but Mos Def's "mainstream" work fuels the more subversive aspects of his creative genius. Whether we like it or not, the same rappers who are busy enjoying the spoils of late capitalism also have the power to speak to the world's disenfranchised who see their situation reflected in the rhythms and lyrics of hip hop. In other words, cultural commodities may bear the deep trace of their producers, but they also circulate and resonate in ways that exceed their local context and surpass individual and group intent. Another essay in { Yo' Mama}, "Looking for the Real Nigga': Social Scientists Construct the Ghetto," also poses a serious challenge to Farber's analysis of social decay. There Kelley argues that social scientists studying inner city communities have constructed their object of investigation. Their work is the result of their own projections, rather than the product of objective analysis.

Isolating cultural rituals and individual behavior to prove theories of Black cultural authenticity and dysfunction, political scientists and sociologists, what Kelley calls "ghetto ethnographers," have reduced cultural forms to "expressions of pathology, compensatory behavior, or creative coping mechanisms' to deal with racism and poverty." (Kelley 1997, 17) Most disturbingly these assessments have fueled much of U.S. public policy over the last thirty years, contributing to ineffective and draconian welfare policies. Not only do these ethnographers fail to realize that their savvy subjects are dissembling and performing specifically for them, but they miss the elements of pleasure, passion, play and aesthetic creativity that fuel Black cultural rituals. Kelley's argument challenges the very assumption that academics have the expertise to assess and define social decay; in fact, he questions the political motivation for and necessity of doing so. Because he refuses to reduce cultural expression to a marker of the presence or absence of resistance, Kelley makes us ask harder, not easier, questions about the relation of culture and identity to social ills and political conflict. Kelley's perspective does not rely upon a lazy us vs. them dichotomy; rather, he combines an analysis of social science research, oral interviews and a keen attention to expressive cultural forms to make his case. In doing so, Kelley convincingly shows that it is the interplay of the context and the performance, the performer and the audience that defines "black urban culture" as [a] process, that defies concepts like . . . nihilistic,' and 'pathological.'" (Kelley 1997, 40)

Kelley's work gives leftists the tools to think in creative ways about the dialectical process of making culture and building resistance even as it complicates our ability to provide simple answers.

1920s or 1960s?

Farber's seeming unwillingness to engage the multivalent and flexible way that resistance works

within marginalized communities also hampers his discussion of cultural revolution. Bypassing the '60s altogether, he takes us back to the Russian '20s where cultural revolution, in his view, meant enlightenment.

Seeing in the schools of futurism, proletkult and constructivism a counter to the “antirationalism, Romanticism and extreme relativism that [he has] criticized,” Farber praises Lenin, Trotsky and others for supporting a “cultural self-transformation oriented to the construction of a rational society built by increasingly civilized groups and individuals.” (Farber 2000, 127, 135)

Though the Russian '20s may be an important case study for thinking through the relation between cultural elites and popular taste, political transformation and cultural innovation, Farber sets it up as an ideal, excluding more recent examples that might also prove politically and intellectually useful.

My own research suggests that the 20th century provided us with other examples of culture in the service of leftist political and personal transformation. In the 1960s and 1970s anticolonial movements fueled political and cultural organizing by Black, Latino/a and Asian American artists and intellectuals, a group I call U.S. Third World leftists.

The interaction between Cubans and Black Americans during the early days of the Castro regime served as an important foundation for the Black Arts and Black liberation movements that followed it. As I have argued elsewhere, the Cuban Revolution's use of culture via the Instituto Cubano de Arte y Industria Cinematográfico (ICAIC) and Casa de Las Américas was extraordinarily important for creating a new anti-racist and anti-imperialist cultural and political vocabulary.(3)

Harold Cruse, Amiri Baraka, Robert Williams as well as members of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the Black Panther Party toured the country, and were inspired by Cuba's example to link their “local” struggle to the global anticolonial one.

Their work found articulation in impassioned treatises such as *Cruse's The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, political conferences such as the 1972 Gary Convention, the independent cinema of Third World Newsreel, as well as Black Arts literature.

Community empowerment might not be the enlightenment Farber idealizes, but it certainly depended upon a dialogue between cultural producers and local communities. It relied upon cultural experimentation and ideological innovation, a tenuous, flexible and messy process of give and take, education and reeducation for both the masses and their cultural advocates.

It is this ability to connect the local and the global, the elite and the popular that informs my own sense of how cultural revolution most significantly speaks to the “social decay” decimating U.S. communities of color in this historical moment. It is also exactly the kind of open-ended process that Farber's investment in the Enlightenment forecloses.

Coda: While finishing this comment, I turned on NPR's “Morning Edition” and stumbled upon an interview with Shannon Reeves, president of the Oakland chapter of the NAACP. He had just returned from the organization's annual convention, and at one point Bob Edwards asked him what he thought was the number one issue in the Black community.

In response, Reeves replied, “I think we have to focus on apathy in our community.” Flush with the language of bootstrap discipline and personal responsibility, he continued, “In the African American community now we have got to focus on those things that we are doing to ourselves What are some things that we can do in the Black community for ourselves without focusing on the

government and without focusing on racism That's where the future of the NAACP has to go."

Let us hope that the NAACP's leadership does not take Reeves' advice, for in these self-righteous sentiments I hear the strains of Farber's complaint. Purify ourselves so we can take advantage of revolutionary (or even reform) opportunities as they arise. Reeves' diatribe reinforces my own sense that Farber's view may resonate with some of the most conservative voices in white and Black communities.

Instead I think the time is ripe to refocus our critiques, political organizing and efforts on new ways to dismantle a state apparatus that imprisons, exploits and discriminates against many of us each and every day.

Whether academic leftists like it or not, the everyday political and cultural practices of the schoolyards and prison yards may be the beginning of "real" resistance in the 21st century. Rather than assume that we, intellectuals, have all the answers, why not build a movement that builds upon, rather than negates, the experiences and insights of those for whom we are supposedly fighting?

If we do not, we may find ourselves as irrelevant to them as the Russian '20s is to the South Bronx of 2002.

Notes

1. For the title, I am indebted to Toni Cade Bambara's use of the phrase in her important essay entitled *Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: Daughters of the Dust and the Black Independent Cinema Movement*. In Manthia Diawara, ed., *Black American Cinema*, New York: Routledge, 1993.
2. Two sources that were helpful in writing this comment are Fatimah Tobing Rony's *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) and Paul Gilroy's chapter "Modernity and Infrahumanity" in *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).
3. Cynthia Young, "Havana Up in Harlem: LeRoi Jones, Harold Cruse and the Making of a Cultural Revolution," *Science and Society*, vol. 65, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 12-38.

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- * *From ATC 97 (March/April 2002)*.

