

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS TO THE CONFERENCE ON CASTE, CLASS AND RACE.

Michael Burawoy, April 25, 2024

When Dr. Talia Esnard invited me to this conference, I responded with unrestrained enthusiasm. I had never before been to the West Indies – except in my imagination. As a young boy I used to listen to every ball in the 5-day test matches between England and the West Indies. It was the 1950s and 1960s – the heyday of West Indian cricket. BBC commentators would bring to life the majestic powers of the truly great: Learie Constantine, Frank Worrell and Garry Sobers.

Much later, I would be captivated by CLR James' *Beyond the Boundary* – bringing sociology to cricket and cricket to sociology, with its inspiring epigraph: “what do they know of cricket, who only cricket know.” James himself was a player and connoisseur of cricket, and a cricket reporter for the Manchester Guardian. His genius was to see how this esoteric game of the English upper class became the scene of a popular struggle against – yet on the terrain of – imperialist hegemony. The West Indies teams beat imperialism at its own game so to speak.

Actually, when I received Dr. Esnard's invitation I was not thinking of cricket but the new generation of scholars, pushing the Caribbean to the center of radical scholarship. I am so excited to be visiting Trinidad that not only gave birth to great cricketers but great Marxist intellectuals: CLR James, the young Eric Williams, George Padmore, Claudia Jones and, the subject of this conference, Oliver Cromwell Cox, whose work has been buried for too long. Except for *Caste, Class and Race* his books are largely out of print, including his understudied and underappreciated trilogy: *The Foundations of Capitalism*, *Capitalism and American Leadership*, and *Capitalism as a System*.

Born 1901, in the same year as CLR James, Cox died in obscurity in 1974 – two years before I graduated from Cox’s alma mater, the University of Chicago. One thing I share with Cox was his disdain for Chicago sociology. Even though I was studying race and class, I don’t recall his name being so much as mentioned. We did, however, hear about other African American sociologists from Chicago such as Franklin Frazier and Charles Johnson. And, of course, we did hear about Robert Park, Cox’s supervisor, whose work Cox would later subject to withering critique. Over the last 20 years there has been an overdue revival of interest in Cox’s ideas by Herbert Hunter and Chris McAuley among others. We are fortunate, indeed, to have Chris with us in this conference.

In my few minutes, I want to position Cox in relation to sociology, Marxism and the Black Radical Tradition. In his famous treatise *Caste, Class and Race* Cox targets the conventional sociology of race, especially Lloyd Warner, Gunnar Myrdal and Robert Park. In a dramatic move he reduces the sociology of race to a Brahminical stereotype of the Indian caste system – a hierarchical system that is harmonious, static and closed – the antithesis of Cox’s view of the US with its conflictual, dynamic, and, according to Cox, a relatively open racial order. This critique of sociology is consistent with Cox’s later dismissal of Black Nationalism and its affirmation of underclass culture, which Cox saw as reproducing anti-Black racism. You might say that Cox was a class reductionist. He optimistically declared: “the problem of racial exploitation, then, will most probably be settled as part of the world proletarian struggle for democracy; every advance of the masses will be an actual or potential advance for the colored people” (p.583). He was a racial assimilationist, ironically, in this regard not different from his teacher Robert Park.

While Cox damns both the sociology of race and, what we would call today, the Black Radical Tradition, Cox also claims he was not a

Marxist, by which he meant he was not a Marxologist who treated the writings of Marx as gospel. He was not, what he called, a “religious Marxist.” But if we think of Marxism as a living tradition – a resplendent tree with roots, trunk, branches, some ready to fall off, others growing in strength, each the product of particular challenges in different times and different places, then, it seems to me, Cox clearly was a Marxist, an independent Marxist, albeit marked by his position as a Black immigrant from middle class Trinidad, excluded from leading Black universities as well as from major white universities, and facing the McCarthyite onslaught of the 1950s.

His Marxism advances a crisis theory of capitalism unmistakably influenced by Engels; a theory of the transition to socialism viewed as the expansion of democracy; a theory of the capitalist state and a ruling class that sponsors racism in its own interests. Imperialism was at the center of his historical analysis, pointing to reformist politics in advanced capitalism and revolutionary struggles in the periphery. He was an architect of world systems theory before we had the term, focusing on the origins of capitalist commerce in the medieval city.

A Marxist yes, but what sort of Marxist? Was he a Black Marxist along with CLR James, Stuart Hall, WEB Du Bois, Walter Rodney and Frantz Fanon, all of whom wrestled with the abiding power of race, class and colonialism? How central was the phenomenology of racism, the experience of racism, to Cox’s account of capitalism? He was very different from CLR James, who, along with his love of Thackeray and Shakespeare could romanticize working class culture. Cox was very different from Stuart Hall who examined the place and experience of the West Indian immigrant in England. Further, did Cox write anything comparable to *The Wretched of Earth*, *The Black Jacobins* or *Black Reconstruction* – visions of history from below? Does Cox’s study of Venice as the crucible of an archetypal merchant capitalism fit the Black Marxist bill?

Alternatively, perhaps Cox's delight in creating typologies, his searing logic, and above all his meticulous comparative methodology tie him to analytical Marxism or, as it used to be called, no bullshit Marxism. But those analytical Marxists, mainly philosophers, political theorists and economists were rarely interested in comparative history, surely the strength of Cox. As others have pointed out, Cox followed Weber and Sombart as much as Marx, so rather than being an analytical Marxist perhaps we should consider him to be the original sociological Marxist? But how does that sit with his contempt for the US sociology of his time?

Like Antonio Gramsci Cox suffered from a crippling, stigmatizing disease during much of his adult life compounding the ethnoracial discrimination he faced; and like Gramsci this contributed to his obdurate intellectual independence. Unlike Gramsci, however, Cox did not respond by taking his Marxism into the political realm, he did not join the Communist Party even though he was sympathetic to the Soviet Union which, of course, was enough to get him into trouble. And unlike WEB Du Bois he was not a public figure. Cox lived an isolated existence, an academic Marxist before his time, before the renaissance of academic Marxism in the 1970s and 1980s that largely passed him by, which makes his achievements all the more remarkable. This conference, here in Trinidad, gives us the opportunity to recover, renew and better understand his works of breath-taking range and to discuss their relevance to the challenges of today.