



The Black Scholar

Journal of Black Studies and Research

ISSN: 0006-4246 (Print) 2162-5387 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtbs20>

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To cite this article: Jonathan Fenderson (2018) Black Studies Post-Janus, The Black Scholar, 48:4, 1-7, DOI: [10.1080/00064246.2018.1514850](https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2018.1514850)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2018.1514850>



Published online: 06 Nov 2018.



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Editor's Note

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JONATHAN FENDERSON

African American Studies is, at this moment, more popular than it has ever been in its history. The study of the Black experience is a widespread and accepted phenomenon on most college campuses across the United States; and this is increasingly becoming the case in other parts of the world. The existence of programs, departments, or research centers is common among many of the country's institutions of higher education, and certainly for those colleges and universities that consider themselves to be among (or striving for) the top tier in the humanities. Black Studies scholars are among the world's most renowned intellectuals in the public sphere. The writing and research of Black Studies scholars has resulted in some of the most coveted awards, including everything from Pulitzer Prizes and MacArthur Genius Grants to National Book Awards and Presidential Medals in the Humanities.

Trade and university presses have taken note, regularly including Black Studies books in their new releases catalogues. Black Studies journals continue to publish volumes, while the older, more established, discipline-specific journals have opened their pages to the study of Black life. Moreover, since the turn of the twenty-first century, doctoral programs offering training in African American Studies continue to proliferate, while simultaneously producing more PhDs in the field than ever before. Finally, these newly minted

PhDs in Black Studies are not only able to forge their desired academic community through several professional organizations and annual conferences, but most of them can lean on these same communities for research support, grants, fellowships, and even support for tenure and promotion. Simply put, based on every traditional academic measure, African American Studies has come into its own and is, indeed, thriving. One has to wonder, then: Is this the utopia that Black Studies advocates set out to find in the fires of late-1960s America?

In the face of such popular success and widespread acceptance, it's intriguing to think about the state of our collective intellectual enterprise in terms of its current scholarly production and trends; its proximity to the original mission of its founders; and the general trajectory it seems to be taking. At this current moment, what are the dominant trends in the scholarship? In what direction (s) does African American Studies seem to be headed? What new challenges has the contemporary moment surfaced, and how have practitioners responded? While most of the answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this brief commentary—and to be clear, also beyond the scope of this particular issue—they do return to one of the overall concerns of *The Black Scholar* from the moment of its creation and recent reinvention. It also speaks to what will be a primary concern for our upcoming 50th anniversary. What follows instead is a set of short notes meant to probe our thinking around one of the major trends evident in contemporary African American Studies scholarship: the glaring underdevelopment, evasion, and, at times, omission of class analysis—and, more

explicitly, political economy—as a fundamental aspect of Black Studies.

During protests for Black Studies in the 1960s and 1970s, many students connected their demands for a new intellectual enterprise with questions of political economy at their respective colleges and universities.¹ In African American Studies scholarship, the term “class” often appears in widely used phrases like “race, class and gender,” “middle class,” or the now increasingly popular “white working class.” However, the adoption of political economy as a serious and useful analytical tool in Black Studies is far too infrequent, and it has not been carried forward as an indispensable (or foundational) pillar of Black Studies thinking. If economics professor Richard Wolff is correct in his assessment that “class is one of the most repressed discourses in this country,” then the current underdevelopment of class analysis in Black Studies may be another sign that the field has become status quo, reflecting dominant trends in American intellectual life.² The real irony here is that this jettisoning of deep class analysis is occurring against the backdrop of record levels of economic inequality and in the face of the Supreme Court’s *Janus vs. AFSCME* decision, essentially gutting the economic base of public-sector labor unions. Even worse, Black Studies scholars have remained relatively quiet about the decision, which not only serves as a frontal assault against labor but an attack on Black folks and women who tend to be overrepresented in public sector jobs.

No doubt related to this trend is the growing fascination with Black celebrities and Black popular culture in African American Studies—which these days is increasingly

hard to distinguish from cultural studies or American Studies. Now more than ever, there seems to be a generation of scholars fixated on Black singers, rappers, actors, film producers, “tastemakers,” and the like. Due to a preoccupation with questions of culture and racial representation our attention seems to be oddly focused on celebrities. While the study of Black popular culture has always been a part of African American Studies, it is now, arguably, one of the most central features. The factors that led to this current state of affairs are many: the popularity and marketability of hip-hop (and other closely related forms of Black music); the coming of age of a generation that grew up listening to hip-hop; the election of the first Black president and the related proliferation of Black talking heads in mainstream media; the constricting of academic job opportunities in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008; the embrace of brand-making and other free market logics on the part of aspiring professionals in the academy as a form of ingenuity in the face of economic collapse; the fabrication and pursuit of popular audiences as a measure of branding, marketability, and relevance; the emergence of various social media platforms; and the profitability and hypervisibility of Black representation in the wake of social unrest and #BlackLivesMatter.

When combined with the previous trend—the general jettisoning of political economy—this contemporary fixation with celebrities has resulted in an uncritical praise and popular defense of a representative Black elite that includes the likes of the Obama family, Beyoncé, Jay-Z, Oprah, and Ava DuVernay, just to name a few. The odd obsession with this new Black aristocracy has helped to

make our students (and our popular reading public) into stargazers who impatiently wait for the next big media story, artistic commodity, or celebrity shenanigan. It has also firmly tied contemporary conceptions of Black identity, and Black cultural and intellectual production with the American marketplace. At the same time, vocal criticism of the growing obsession with popular culture commentary, and the related social media cycles and pursuits of public intellectual status within Black Studies, often results in one being pegged as curmudgeonly or passé—both terms I have slowly come to embrace not because they accurately describe my personality or intellectual disposition, but because they serve as attempts to register my genuine discontent with the prevailing state of the field. Needless to say, African American Studies cannot thrive solely on Twitter, television and tales of Black aristocrats. There has to be more; and a big part of that requires us to couple our celebrity fixation with a class politics that relentlessly criticizes any aristocracy.

Another concurrent (and connected) tendency related to our jettisoning of class is the general canonization of Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. References to Robinson's work and his notion of "racial capitalism" are everywhere in contemporary African American (and American) Studies scholarship.³ Robinson's passing, in 2016, only seemed to increase the popularity of his work and rightfully situate him as a towering figure in the Black intellectual tradition.⁴ On the surface, it would seem that the revival of Robinson's work would contradict our jettisoning of class; but a closer look suggests otherwise. Where Robinson is successful at

tracing a history of Black resistance in the African Diaspora alongside processes of racialization and racial formation that developed first within Europe, his notion of Black radicalism is not rooted in historical materialism or Marxist conceptions of class. Instead, for Robinson, "culture and consciousness are as powerful in determining choice and behavior as the material reproduction of society."⁵ This belief results in Robinson's reliance on "a collective consciousness" among Africans and references to "a single historical identity" harbored in the African Diaspora.⁶ In other words, to flesh out the Black radical tradition while eschewing Marxist notions of historical materialism and class, Robinson constructs an African Diaspora essentialism that is rooted in what Walter Rodney once referred to as "the essential oneness of African culture."⁷

This kind of essentialism and corporate racial logic is most often associated with narrow forms of Black cultural nationalism, and is widely criticized in Black academic circles and Africanist scholarship. Yet it stands as a core feature of Robinson's work. There is no doubt that Robinson's *Black Marxism* remains a penetrating critique of Eurocentric conceptions of world history in Marx's writing and subsequent Marxist scholarship; but what's more interesting is that his general abandonment of class fits perfectly with contemporary trends in African American Studies. One could even go so far as to say that Robinson's *Black Marxism* and, more specifically, his notion of "racial capitalism," allow contemporary scholars in the field to both express their scorn for capitalism without fully coming to terms with the salience of explicitly Marxist articulations of

class and labor exploitation and, as Louis Chude-Sokei has pointed out, continue to deploy blackness uncritically.⁸

Ultimately, what Robinson provides is the blueprint for a racialized history of capitalism's global development that reinscribes racial ideas as a "What came first: chicken or egg?" scenario. In this assessment, racism functions not as an evolving ideology, but as "a material force ... [that] inevitably permeate[s] the social structures emergent from capitalism."⁹ This conception of racism as a material force does very little to deepen our understanding of the ways class functions (unevenly) as a major determinant in Black life. Of course, it is important to state plainly that this is not a critique of Robinson, the scholar-activist, whose life and work serve as an important and underappreciated model for intellectuals laboring in the academy and working for a more just world. Instead, the point is to probe the reasons why Robinson's *Black Marxism* seems to have reached the peak of its popularity at this particular moment, and why so many believe his work to be beyond reproach at a time when political economy seems to be off the table.

This general eschewing of political economy is also evident in contemporary African American political life; and its presence in contemporary politics should be disturbing to us all, though not surprising. For example, very little discussion has unfolded about the ways the non-profit sector has structured and shaped the Movement for Black Lives at both the local and national levels. The unequal distribution of resources from foundations and other granting institutions has wreaked havoc on organizing ecosystems

both locally—in places like Ferguson (and St. Louis, more broadly), Baltimore, and Chicago—and nationally. To raise these questions publicly almost always results in labels of heresy or betrayal. However, the repercussions for our decision to ignore these issues and knowingly leave these questions off the table will likely be far more damaging in the long run. The consequences will not only have implications for how Black people imagine social movements and the political act of organizing, but they will also distort our view of the moment we are in, the actual political possibilities that are at stake, and our ability to construct accurate and useful histories based on this moment. The point here is that questions of political economy profoundly shape Black political life, even when we choose not to address them.

Perhaps the most salient example of this came in the last presidential primaries when Hillary Clinton used the persistence of anti-Black racism, sexism, and homophobia as foils to a class analysis. Reaching for any useful tactic to undermine a surging Bernie Sanders campaign hell bent on making class a fulcrum in American political discourse, Clinton defensively remarked:

Not everything is about an economic theory, right? If we broke up the big banks tomorrow ... would that end racism? Would that end sexism? Would that end discrimination against the LGBT community? Would that make people feel more welcoming to immigrants overnight?¹⁰

While the assumption behind Clinton's bold assertion that a single political act could end racism is downright foolish, the more

disturbing point—which coincides with dominant trends in African American Studies—is the general willingness to use race, or other points of identity, to dismiss the salience of class analysis. Clinton’s remarks during a routine stump speech would have been ignorable had they not also been echoed, in one form or another, by established Black elected officials—including the likes of Hakeem Jeffries (Congressional Representative of New York’s 8th district), J. Todd Rutherford (Congressional Representative of South Carolina’s 74th district), and John Lewis (Congressional Representative of Georgia’s 5th district), several Black public intellectuals, and numerous activists laying claim to the #BlackLivesMatter mantel.¹¹

Ultimately Clinton’s embarrassing defeat, combined with the endless shock value of a Trump presidency, has resulted in a general dismissal of Clinton’s remarks as an indicator of where we are politically. Instead, many Black Studies scholars understood Trump’s victory as further evidence of, as Robinson puts it, “the racism of the American ‘white’ working class and their general ideological immaturity.”¹² But what if we read it a different way? What if, in our criticism of Trump supporters, we also acknowledged our own unwillingness to think seriously about political economy, and situate class analysis as an important cornerstone in African American Studies; especially since class not only shapes relationships across race, but in an era of Black aristocrats it also shapes relationships between Black people? Perhaps if we acknowledge the general avoidance (dismissal and misuse) of class analysis in our discipline, it would allow us to gauge just how American “African American Studies” has become.

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that this is not the first time a Black Studies scholar has advocated for those of us in the field to pay more attention to questions of class, labor, political economy and, dare I say, the old Marxist notion of exploitation (as opposed to the widely used and threadbare notion of “oppression”).¹³ A rich tradition already exists, and it continues to be built by contemporary scholars like Gerald Horne, Charisse Burden-Stelly, Sundiata Cha-Jua, Joy James, Clarence Lang, Claudrena Harold, Devin Fergus, Cedric Johnson, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Abdul Alkalimat, and Adolph Reed, Jr. Moreover, the work of these and other scholars thinking seriously about class is no doubt complemented by the incredibly rich and dynamic work of a number of scholars who are historicizing the ways political economy plays out in racialized ways. Examples would have to include case studies like Nathan Connolly’s *A World More Concrete*, which connects segregation to property ownership in south Florida, while simultaneously troubling the idea of universally shared Black political or economic interests.¹⁴ Peter Hudson’s *Bankers and Empire* is another example, albeit transnational, that unpacks the troubling racist ideas held by Wall Street elites who bankrolled colonial expansion in the Caribbean in the pursuit of profits.¹⁵ In fact, Hudson’s work evokes connections to *Fascism and Big Business*—a book that deserves some attention in our current political climate—by the queer anarchist, Daniel Guérin.¹⁶

When read together in the contemporary moment, Connolly, Hudson, and Guérin remind us that Jim Crow, fascism, and colonialism were all projects underwritten by

powerful economic interests, and in the case of Connolly's work those economic interests often fractured racial solidarity by exposing competing aims among Black folks. More importantly, when taken as a whole, the collective of scholars that have insisted on approaching Black Studies through political economy, combined with emergent historians unpacking the concomitant histories of race and class, may actually be responsible for pointing us in a direction that allows us to reinvigorate Black Studies and keep it from becoming stagnant as we reach the 50-year mark. They may also help us better make sense of our contemporary political moment, as we enter a post-Janus world just a year or so after the first Black president has left office, yet still working and living in the after-effects of the economic crash that happened a decade ago. If this is indeed the case, it is an endeavor that those of us at *The Black Scholar* seek to take part in.

For Samir Amin, Aretha Franklin, and Sterling Stuckey

Acknowledgments

I'm indebted to my brother Brendan Roediger—an incredible lawyer, sharp intellect, activist, and downright decent human being—for bringing the work of Guérin to my attention.

Notes

1. "List of the Demands of Striking Food Workers at UNCG" (March 27, 1969), James Sharbrough Ferguson Papers. (Mss 218), University Archives and Manuscripts, Jackson Library, University of North Carolina at Greensboro;

Ada Fisher, "What is Neo-Black Society?" *The Carolinian*, October 18, 1968; Marian Morgan, "Black Studies program may come soon," *The Carolinian*, February 1969, p. 21; Stephen C. Ferguson, *Philosophy of African American Studies: Nothing Left of Blackness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

2. Richard Wolff, "Marx's Concept of Class." *Logos: A Journal of Modern Society and Culture* 17, no. 1 (Winter 2018). <http://logosjournal.com/2018/marxs-concept-of-class/>.

3. Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

4. W.F. Santiago-Valles, "Tribute to Cedric Robinson: Constructing A History of the Future," *The Black Scholar* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 5–10; Robin D.G. Kelley, "Cedric J. Robinson: The Making of a Black Radical Intellectual," *Counterpunch* (June 17, 2016), <https://bostonreview.net/race/robin-d-g-kelley-what-did-cedric-robinson-mean-racial-capitalism>. Robin D.G. Kelley, "What did Cedric Robinson Mean by Racial Capitalism?," *Boston Review* (January 12, 2017). Also see the African American Intellectual History Society's Roundtable on Cedric Robinson and Black Marxism, <https://www.aaihs.org/the-negation-of-the-negation-in-the-world-system-introducing-cedric-robinsons-black-marxism/>.

5. Alexandra Valiente, "Capitalism, Marxism, the Black Radical Tradition: An Interview with Cedric Robinson" (June 6, 2016), <https://revolutionarystrategicstudies.wordpress.com/2016/06/06/capitalism-marxism-and-the-black-radical-tradition-an-interview-with-cedric-robinson/>.

6. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, pp. 171, 315, 317.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 73. At this particular juncture in the text, Robinson cites Walter Rodney, "Upper Guinea and the Significance of the Origins of African Enslaved in the New World," *Journal of Negro History* 54, no. 4 (October 1969): 345.

8. Louis Chude-Sokei, "Introduction: Blackness as Method," *The Black Scholar* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 1–2.

9. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, p. 2.

10. Matt Taibbi, "The Line that May Have Won Hillary Clinton the Nomination," *Rolling Stone* (April 28, 2016), <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/the-line-that-may-have-won-hillary-clinton-the-nomination-40504/>.

11. John Lewis' distrust of Sanders' class politics and plan for free higher education led him to contend, "There's not anything free in America. We all have to pay for something. Education is not free. Health care is not free. Food is not free. Water is not free. I think it's very misleading to say to the American people, we're going to give you something free." That such forceful assertions can come from the same Black elected official who once declared that "education is a civil right" should cause us to pause. The assertion was a glaring example of how conventional projects for racial justice can become so emaciated

in their political imagination that they actually reinforce the thinking and practice of the status quo, and, in this case, reinforce the logic of capitalism and free market ideologies.

12. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, p. 314.

13. Ferguson, *Philosophy of African American Studies*; Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, "Introduction to the Special Issue on Black Political Economy: Obama and the Deteriorating Condition of African America," *The Black Scholar* 40, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 2–6; Abdul Alkalimat, ed., *Paradigms in Black Studies* (Chicago: Twenty-First Century Press, 1990).

14. Nathan D.B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

15. Peter Hudson, *Bankers and Empire: How Wall Street Colonized the Caribbean* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

16. Daniel Guérin, *Fascism and Big Business*, 17th ed. (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2017).

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