

Critically Understanding Race-Connected Practices: A Reading of W. E. B. Du Bois and Richard Wright

Bobby M. Wilson

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I think that the central issue of philosophy and critical thought since the eighteenth century has always been, still is, and will, I hope, remain the question: What is this Reason that we use? What are its historical effects? What are its limits, and what are its dangers?

- Michel Foucault (1984b, 249)

Introduction

The questions that Foucault raised as those central to philosophy and critical thought should also be a part of any critical discourse on race-connected practices. By race-connected practices, I mean practices resulting from racism – negative attitudes groups of people or individuals belonging to one race hold about individuals or groups of people belonging to a different race. We need to understand the historical effects and limits of these practices.

In explaining societal forces, W E. B. Du Bois, like Karl Marx and other social theorists before him, gave more weight to history than geography. In his

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autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940, 8), Du Bois wrote that his “birthplace” was less important than his “birth-time.” He saw his life as movement between repeatedly historical moments and “personal interest” in his life story that formed his conception of race. According to Kenneth Mostern (1996, 29, 31), the book

is structured as a dialectical account that presumes to locate the individual in a world history This movement between self and history provides the basic structure of the book events of his life are followed by local events, which are, in turn, followed by international events, which then always circle back to describe their local meanings the text serves not merely as the “autobiography” of a “self” but also as a representation of the “concept” of the category “race” ...

Changes in the form and shape of race-connected practices follow historical moments, which shape our conception of race.

Although Du Bois gives more weight to his birth-time, he (1940, 8) begins his autobiography by discussing the significance of his birthplace: “I was born by a golden river in the shadow of two great hills. My birthplace was Great Barrington, a little town in western Massachusetts in the valley of the Housatonic, flanked by the Berkshire Hills.” Du Bois wants the reader of the autobiography to “revel in the aristocratic beauty and character of people who are of African descent, though race is not stressed in particular ...” (Mostern, 1996, 33). He (1940, 10) describes his birthplace as a place where “[t]he color line was manifest and yet not absolutely drawn” – unlike the South, which he would later experience and about which he would write. We learn that “Du Bois, a New Englander boy from a town with few African Americans, who has personal values that continue to seem conservative long after he has become a radical intellectual, makes clear that race has not prevented him from initially accepting the premises of his education,” which was “the most distinguished education available to any American in the late nineteenth century” (Mostern, 1996, 36, 37). In some fundamental sense, not only does Du Bois’ birth-time matter in forming his conception of race, but his “birthplace” does as well. Place matters.

A reading of Du Bois and Richard Wright suggests that race-connected practices should be understood not only in their proper historical context, but also in their appropriate geographical context. Groups, classes, ideas, values, and political systems produce their space at particular historical moments (Lefebvre, 1991). The practices of Jim Crowism in the American South and apartheid in South Africa produced their own geographies. Racial practices are (re)constructed at different historical moments and places.

Bringing in History

Like most people, geographers have very strong feelings and know where they stand personally about race. However, we must take care not to place race in what C. Vann Woodward (1974, 128) called the “realm of ideas, moral principles, and their agitators.” It remains largely impotent without the appropriate historical or social supports. Racial changes are not due just to failures or successes at instilling a sense of humanitarianism and morality in the economic or political elites, who would then move to build or eliminate racial barriers. The black community has a history of extending itself to that which seems implausible, that which makes little sense (Simone, 1989, 57-58). Du Bois’ initial theory concerning the race problem in America was that it was primarily a matter of ignorance on the part of whites, and the solution calls for “white folk to desist from certain practices and give up certain beliefs” (1940, 284). An appeal to the moral and personal goodness of white people was also the original intent of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963). However, Du Bois moved toward a more critical discourse on race, situating the race problem in America in its appropriate historical context. And just before his death, King also realized that the success of the civil rights struggle would not have been possible if the time was not prepared for it. Moral or philosophical imperatives without meaningful referents in the historical and material world do not suffice (Gabardi, 2001, 43). Foucault (1984a) treated modernity and postmodernity as philosophical attitudes, rather than social and historical practices in the material world.

So much of the present discourse on race is ahistorical – a discourse that literally reinforces the notion of “the end of history.” Several years ago, a historian serving as an expert witness for the plaintiff in an Alabama redistricting case testified to the racial history of the community. The defense objected at every opportunity, on the grounds that the history was irrelevant to the present case. To avoid a critical discourse on race, the U.S. has become a society – a land – “without memory.” History disappears; the past is dead and is represented to us in this postmodern world as a series of glossy images and commemorations.

When it comes to explaining race (i.e., relations between different ethnic groups, racist practices, racist beliefs, racial prejudice, and so on), “it becomes a great deal more complex, because it requires putting together explanations from different areas of knowledge (and historical moments). All the attempts at simple explanations are doomed to fail” (Hall, 1981, 59). Du Bois (1940, 283) eventually realized that beyond “ignorance and deliberate ill-will as causes of race prejudice, there must be stronger and more threatening forces, forming the founding stones of race antagonisms ...” He (1940, 296) no longer believed that “looking for salvation from the whites was feasible.” Things are not always what they seem, or as obvious. As Marx (1974, 174) expressed it, “A distinction is made in private life between what a man thinks and says about himself and what he really is and does. In historical struggles one must make a still sharper distinction between the phrases and fantasies of the parties and their real organization and real interests, between their conceptions of themselves and what they

really are.” We must make the same kind of distinction in critically analyzing race-connected practices, distinguishing between fantasies and reality.

The purpose of bringing in history is not to return to the past, but to provide a critique and an understanding of the present. It is not simply for an understanding of social life as it is expressed in the black community; it is also, ultimately, for an understanding of life as it is expressed in the larger society. Hall (1981, 60) notes that

(r)ace is a phenomenon which one only begins to understand when one sees it working within the different institutions, processes, and practices of whole societies, in their full complexity; societies in which race becomes a determining aspect of the social structure, of the way in which its relations work and the way in which institutions are linked and connected with one another.

Geographers have to situate such practices historically to reveal their real structure. This entails asking critical questions regarding the historical effects of these practices, starting with black slavery and the need for surplus labor and working our way through the recent restructuring of the economy to understand how race has been (re)constructed (Wilson, 2000a, 2000b).

Race was (re)constructed at different historical moments or periods of social upheaval – e.g., Reconstruction, post-Reconstruction, the Great Depression, and so on – that shaped what happened in the 1960s. There are correlations between historical moments and race-connected practices; they are diachronic, changing form with each changing moment. Only by understanding these moments can we depersonalize the notion of race and critically understand what it “really” means to be “white” or “black.”

Although he was sensitive to its failures, the 1917 Russian Revolution, according to Du Bois (1940, 284), caused a change in his basic thought about the race problem: “(O)ne of the largest nations of the world made up its mind frankly to face a set of problems which no nation was at the time willing to face, and which many nations including our own are unwilling fully to face even to this day.” That set of problems involved the issue of massive poverty. More than fifty years later, America was still unwilling to face this problem. In his address to the Tenth Anniversary Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1969, 160-61) raised the issue again:

We must honestly face the fact that the (civil rights) Movement must address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society. There are forty million poor people here. And one day we must ask the question, “Why are there forty million poor people in America?” And when you begin to ask that question, you are raising questions about the economic system, about broader distribution of wealth. When you

ask that question, you begin to question the capitalist economy ... we've got to begin to ask questions about the whole society.

In his attempt to understand critically race-connected practices in America, Du Bois knew how important it was to ask these kinds of questions. Wright also knew that the race problem could not be solved until these critical issues were addressed, and he ({1944a} 1983, 41) put the burden on blacks to play an important role in resolving these issues:

The Negro could never solve his problem until the deeper problem of American civilization had been faced and solved. And because the Negro was the most cast-out of all the outcast people in America, I felt that no other group in America could tackle this problem of what our American lives meant so well as the Negro could ... It seemed to me that for the Negro to try to save himself he would have to forget himself and try to save a confused, materialistic nation from its own drift toward self-destruction. Could the Negro accomplish this miracle? Could he take up his bed and walk?

Planting “the Flesh of Black Experience”

Marxism has already uncovered the larger historical structures of society, providing the necessary foundation for critically understanding the black experience. Wright (1937, 60) noted that Marxism, as a tool of social analysis, has revealed the “skeleton of society,” the base. The revealing of the skeleton, he noted, “is just the starting point; there remains the [critical] task to plant flesh on those bones,” the “flesh of black experience” (quoted in George, 1999, 53).

Why does this critical task remain unfinished? It remains unfinished because, in the modern, urban, industrial economy, both segregation and the race prejudice that fed it were viewed as a contemporary condition, “an anachronistic survival from earlier, more primitive stages of evolution” (Cell, 1982, 4-5). For Marx and Engels (1955, 9-10, 17, 21), the modern industrial economy undermined the more primitive stages of evolution.

The modern bourgeois society ... has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggles in place of the old ones. ... Differences of age and sex have no longer any distinctive social validity for the working class. ... All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of majority.

While Marxism sought an understanding of the larger society, it marginalized or under-theorized consistently race in its analysis of social formation. It did not

recognize the same “Negro” that Wright and Du Bois saw. According to Wright ({1944a} 1983, 39, 40), “the only drawback was that their (Marxist) world was just too simple for belief ... I was now convinced that they did not know the complex nature of Negro life ...” Capital does not operate as a pure logic. It has always utilized existing values in the social terrain, As Jim Hoagland (1972, 191) noted, Marxism “ignores a highly variable human factor in history. And there are few more powerful and universal human forces than racism.”

The essentialism of Marxism did not prevent Wright and Du Bois from using Marxism as a tool for analyzing race in America. Without such analysis, Wright (1937, 53) noted, much of “Negro writing became a sort of conspicuous ornamentation,” external to the lives of blacks – another reason that the critical task of planting the flesh of black experience remained incomplete. He (1937, 54, 60) goes on to say:

Rarely was the best of this writing addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his aspirations ... Negro writers have lagged sadly, and as time passes the gap widens between them and their people ... it is through a Marxist conception of reality and society that the maximum degree of freedom in thought and feeling can be gained for the Negro writer ... this dramatic Marxist vision, when consciously grasped, endows the writer with a sense of dignity which no other vision can give.

Du Bois (1940, 303) considered Marx one of the greatest men of modern times, stating that “he put his finger squarely upon our difficulties ...”

In planting the flesh of black experience, however, neither Du Bois nor Wright let the historical traditions of classical Marxism overburden their analysis of race. The complexity of the racial situation caused both to use Marxist theory, not as an unyielding application of categories grounded in a European bourgeois and a proletarian class struggle applied to a recalcitrant black reality, but as a tool of analysis for creating categories and ideas suitable to the black experience. We see this increasingly over time in the works of Du Bois.

In 1896, the University of Pennsylvania offered Du Bois a temporary appointment as an “Investigator of the Social Conditions of the Colored Race” in the city of Philadelphia. As a result of this appointment, he produced his study of *The Philadelphia Negro* ({1899} 1967), one of the earliest contributions to the study of residential segregation and discrimination in the workplace of a capitalist city. Du Bois’ (1940, 59) study of Philadelphia “revealed the Negro group as a symptom, not a cause; as a striving, palpitating group, and not an inert, sick body of crime; as a long historic development and not a transient occurrence.” The study countered Hegel’s notion that black people were not historical beings. According to Hegel, the ahistoricity of black people was evidence of their inferiority (Eze, 1997, 109-49).

Du Bois also edited the *Atlanta University Publications*, which consisted of 18 monographs published between 1896 and 1914. These publications represent the first

attempt at a comprehensive study of American blacks and the first writings to make factual, empirical evidence the center of sociological work on blacks (Green and Driver, 1987, 12). And, in what I consider his most important work, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (1935), Du Bois planted the flesh of black experience on the skeleton of Reconstruction, a major historical moment in U.S. capitalist development. He critically analyzed the structural and institutional forces driving Reconstruction to reveal its true meaning for blacks in the post-Civil War era.

In contrast with the racist biological assumptions held by most social scientists of the period, Du Bois (1940) realized that racism did not lay in the realm of nature. Race should be understood as nonbiological and historical. The economic foundation of the modern world was based on the recognition and preservation of race-connected practices that justified black slavery and kept white labor classes in their places by paying low wages. Du Bois (1940, 129-30) believed that

it was in Africa that I came more clearly to see the close connection between race and wealth. The fact that even in the minds of the most dogmatic supporters of race theories and believers in the inferiority of colored folk to white, there was a conscious or unconscious determination to increase their incomes by taking full advantage of this belief. And then gradually this thought was metamorphosed into a realization that the income-bearing value of race prejudice was the cause and not the result of theories of race inferiority; that, particularly in the United States, the income of the Cotton Kingdom based on black slavery caused the passionate belief in Negro inferiority and the determination to enforce it even by arms.

The hegemony of the ecological approach in urban geography for much of the twentieth century excluded the works of Du Bois, whose ideas contrasted sharply with the assimilation view on blacks in the city that the University of Chicago and urban sociology supported during the first half of the twentieth century (Burgess, 1925; Park, 1936, 1950; Wirth, 1938). Human ecologists saw blacks as progressing up the economic ladder, rather than trapped by discrimination in the housing and job market. E. Franklin Frazier (1932, 1938), a black sociologist and a student of human ecology, pointed to similar conclusions in his studies of the black communities on Chicago's Southside and Harlem in New York.

Income-Bearing Value of Race Practices

The “income-bearing value of race prejudice” – that is, racialized marketplaces – of which Du Bois spoke continues to be a major determinant of the residential and work patterns of the black population. In one of his last public addresses, delivered at Johnson C. Smith College in Charlotte, North Carolina, Du Bois indicated that the struggle for civil rights would be victorious in the end, but that this victory would not

eliminate racial inequality (Marable, 1991, 76-77). The subtle workings of the marketplace transform the geography of places along racial lines. Blacks become, as Burbach (1998) noted, “castaways of global capitalism.”

In post-civil rights America and post-apartheid South Africa, blacks continue to be over-represented among the poor and working classes. The black community lacks capital investments. It is more cost-effective to write off – to disinvest – the whole community, as opposed to acquiring the investment potential of a property site or place within the black community. This contributes to the spatial pattern of uneven development. In America, this has had a significant impact on black households’ net worth, 43 percent of which is based on housing equity. Devaluation causes the loss of significant housing equity and limits the potential for new investments in the community. Appraisers of real estate devalue properties in the black community, decreasing black households’ median net worth, which is ten times less than that of white households. Lending institutions are unwilling to invest, and insurance companies assess high premiums for black properties, further devaluing the dollar in the black community.

In a society that perceives blacks on the average to be less productive than whites, it pays both investors and employers not to consider blacks for investment or employment. Although judging individuals and communities on their merits would be more just, the cost of doing so would be prohibitive. The employer can easily observe racial attributes or practices, cheap forms of information that often become the basis for what Steele (1999) called “stereotype threats” – negative stereotypes.

While every community experiences such threats, they apply in many more situations for blacks. For Du Bois, these stereotypes obtain their historical necessity on the economic level – that is, in the formation of a particular labor force for the purpose of capital accumulation – and are fetishized through racial practices (Mostern, 1996, 30). Paying minimum wages, centers of financial trading and investment rely on black women from the inner city to clean the offices (in some cities, increasing numbers of Hispanic women perform this task). According to David Harvey (2000, 122), this indicates “a discursive and largely racist-sexist construction of the inherent ‘value’ of *that* kind of labor power from *that* kind of place” (emphasis in original). Reaffirming Du Bois, he goes on to say, “This stereotyping was automatically reinforced and framed within a circulation process of variable capital and capital accumulation that insisted that this was the kind of labor power that was essential to its own valorization.”

Stereotyping is reinforced not only through the production of labor power but also in more personal situations. Is it because of my race that the bank denied me the loan, or that the employer denied me the job? According to Steele (1999, 46), “(One) cannot know the answers, but neither can (one’s) rational self fully dismiss the question.” Whites, however, *can* dismiss the question, for being white in the U.S. has meant not having to acknowledge one’s whiteness. Blacks, on the other hand, are fearful of doing something that would inadvertently confirm racial stereotypes, which

raises a deeper question that reflects the hegemony of race-connected practices: “Will race be a boundary to (one’s) experience, to (one’s) emotions, to (one’s) relationships?” (Steele, 1999, 46). Historically, blacks have been unable to ask the question, “Can we do it?” Instead, their question has been “Will they (whites) let us do it?” (Wright, {1941} 1988, 35). For both Du Bois and Wright, this question raises a more general question concerning the nature of politics.

Politics of Racial Identity

In 1928, the Communist International Congress decreed that blacks in the South were the potential advance guard of a Communist revolution in the United States. Although agrarian in nature, this revolution would be launched from Birmingham, the South’s industrial hub. Birmingham became the Southern headquarters of the American Communist Party, and the nerve center of a Southern working-class movement that challenged the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the arena of black liberation (Kelley, 1990).

But there would be no revolutionary proletariat in America. The white proletariat, in particular, was not easy to mobilize for the class struggle. Responding to the complexity of the racial situation in the United States, Du Bois (1940, 192) first noted that blacks have not divided into capitalists and laborers, fully separate classes: “... we cannot follow the class structure of America; we do not have the economic or political power, the ownership of machines and materials, the power to direct the processes of industry, the monopoly of capital and credit.” More importantly, Du Bois (1972, 269) noted, blacks in the U.S. are “theoretically” part of the proletariat, being an exploited class of cheap labor; in *praxes*², however, they “are not a part of the white proletariat and are not recognized by that proletariat to any great extent.” Segmenting the working class along race lines enabled both the black and white segments “to be so influenced by their material surroundings that they see but a little phase of the complex process of their lives and the whole is obscured from them ...” (Wright, {1941} 1988, 24). According to Du Bois (1940, 205), Communists

did not envisage a situation where instead of a horizontal division of classes, there was a vertical fissure, a complete separation of classes by race, cutting square across the economic layers ... the split between white and black workers was greater than that between white workers and capitalists; and this split depended not simply on economic exploitation but on a racial folklore grounded on centuries of instinct, habit and thought and implemented by the conditioned reflex of visible color ...

² Editors’ note: plural of *praxis*, in this case meaning “practice,” or “everyday conduct.”

This flat and incontrovertible fact, imported Russian Communism ignored, would not discuss.

To illustrate this point, Du Bois (1940, 298-99) pointed to the Scottsboro case and the involvement of the Communists, who attempted to use the case to foment a revolution in the United States.

About the last thing calculated to arouse the white workers of America would be the defense of a Negro accused of attacking a white woman, even though the Negro was probably innocent and the woman a prostitute. This fact the Communists either did not know or ignored ... Right as they undoubtedly were on the merits of the case, they were tragically wrong in their methods if they were seeking to free these victims.

Because of race, it was “silly” to apply the doctrine of a class politics without “modification or thought” (Du Bois, 1972, 269). Du Bois (1933, 55) thus maintained that “(w)hatever (Marx) said and did, concerning the uplift of the working class, must, therefore, be modified so far as Negroes are concerned by the fact that he had not studied at first hand their peculiar race problem in America.”

Politically, Wright (1944b) tried to transcend race, seizing upon the essentialism of Marxism and its vision of unity among all workers.

It was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole ... My life as a Negro in America had led me to feel – though my helplessness had made me try to hide it from myself – that the problem of human unity was more important than bread, more important than physical living itself; for I felt that without a common bond uniting men, without a continuous current of shared thought and feeling circulating through the social system, like blood coursing through the body, there could be no living worthy of being called human. (Wright, {1944a} 1983, 63)

Increasingly, he ({1944a} 1983, 63) doubted the essentialism of Marxism and the Communists’ agenda, wondering whether “a solution of unity was possible.” Like Du Bois, he did not accept the straitjacket of communist orthodoxy, for it did not fit the American situation, and he eventually left the Communist Party.

“American Negroes,” according to Du Bois (1940, 205), “were asked to accept a complete dogma without question or alteration.” For the Communist Party to alter its

politics to accommodate a particular place or situation would have weakened international solidarity. According to Wright ({1944a} 1983, 120), to maintain solidarity, the American Communists used political methods forged by the underground Russian Bolshevik even when the American situation did not call for it. They linked the situation in America with the world scene, to the world struggle. And because the Bolshevik “associated betrayal with intellectualism” (Wright 1983, 120), American Communists were also distrustful of Wright, the self-achieved intellectual, who had much to offer. Du Bois (1933, 55) believed the failure of Communists to alter their politics to be “a great loss to American Negroes.” However, he (1940, 192) knew that blacks could not stand still: “we cannot permit ourselves simply to be the victims of exploitation and social exclusion.” And indeed, blacks did not stand still. The greatest antidiscrimination event in the first half of the twentieth century was not a class movement in the classical Marxian sense, but an all-black movement, which would set the American stage for the postmodern politics of identity and difference in the second half of the twentieth century (Wilson, 2000b).

The academy’s failure to recognize Du Bois’ contributions to the study of race-connected practices relates not only to the marginalization of such studies within the academy but also to his marginalization within the social sciences as a black scholar (Sibley, 1995, 137-56). His work on Philadelphia was one of the first community studies in the U.S., and *The Soul of Black Folk* – written in 1903 – provides much of the theoretical discourse for what is now called a “postcolonial critique” (Mostern, 2000, 62). Yet, many universities did not offer him an instructorship, while white classmates of “lower academic standing” became full professors at Pennsylvania and Chicago (Green and Driver, 1987, 11). Speaking of his situation at the University of Pennsylvania, Du Bois (1940, 58) noted, “I ignored the pitiful stipend. It made no difference to me that I was put down as an ‘assistant instructor’ and even at that, that my name never actually got into the catalogue; it goes without saying that I did no instructing save once to pilot a pack of idiots through the Negro slums.” It made no difference to Du Bois (1940, 58, 61), because he saw it as an opportunity “to study a historical group of black folk and to show exactly what their place was in the community.” He credited the University of Pennsylvania for attempting “to study the Negro problems in a single definite locality.” Not only did Du Bois realize the importance of situating race-connected practices within their appropriate historical context, but – I believe – he also saw the importance of studying these practices within their specific local and intersubjective context.

Bringing in Geography

We must situate race, not only in a historical context, but also in a historical-geographical context. We must expose the skeletons of places and plant the flesh of black experiences on those bones as well. Social practices are not only historically specific but geographically or place-specific, even in the age of globalization.

Regional differences in the mode of regulation are essential to understanding critically race-connected practices. Whereas a critical theory of race requires sensitivity to historical structures in capitalist development, a critical geography of race-connected practices requires sensitivity to the way in which regional regimes of accumulation transform racial practices. The institutionalization of race-connected practices as a mode of social regulation does not remain unchanged across regions, just as the practices themselves do not remain unchanged across time. Race-connected practices are a product of “a series of specific class relations that vary by place and over time, and that change as a consequence of changing material conditions” (Greenberg, 1980, 406).

Unlike classical Marxism, regulation theory denies that capitalism as a historical process could be comprehended as a single set of regulations that remained unchanged across national, regional, and local boundaries (Lipietz, 1986; Brenner and Glick, 1991). Social processes are not exportable commodities; they are outcomes of local, regional, and national regulatory processes, spatial contingencies that affect the role and status of people of color. As Hall (1981, 60) noted, “(r)ace and class relations will always be differently combined in different social formations, as you will see if you compare the complexities of their combination in South Africa, say, and the United States or Britain.”

The cultural logic of capitalism assumes that growth overcomes regional diversity. Marx treated the whole world as one nation and assumed that capitalist production everywhere was the same. Classical Marxism viewed the English pattern of capitalist development as something of a universal model. However, England was actually an individualistic, market-oriented, mobile society heavily dependent on hired labor (wage labor) as early as the thirteenth century. Marx knew a great deal about slavery in the British Caribbean, and he also wrote about slavery as if its effects were the same throughout the hemisphere – but the world the slaveholders made in the West Indies and Latin America differed from that created in the U.S. (Genovese, 1969).

The United States and South Africa

The peculiarity of the race problem in America was due mainly to the peculiarity of the South, which rejected outright an intensive regime of capital accumulation based on wage labor in favor of an extensive regime of accumulation based on black slavery (Wilson, 2000a). In antebellum Alabama, wage-earners represented only 0.6 percent and 0.8 percent of Alabama’s population in 1850 and 1860, respectively (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1858, 1865). As late as 1900, wage earners still comprised less than 3 percent of the population (Dodd and Dodd, 1973). Black slavery entailed a mode of regulation that took the South down a route to industrial capitalism different from the agroindustrial production complex of the Midwest, which fed the development of a manufacturing belt extending from New England across the Great Lakes to Chicago (Page and Walker, 1991). The North made

a smoother transition to an intensive regime of accumulation based on free wage labor than did the South.

While the recognition and preservation of race-connected practices kept blacks in their place in the U.S., the American South stopped short of enforcing an apartheid racial system that, in South Africa's version, permitted a more direct coercion of the black population. Apartheid provided additional security for South Africa's white population, which was smaller in number relative to blacks than was the case in the American South (Fredrickson, 1981, 240). In 1700, there were approximately one million indigenous Africans in what is now South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland, but only a few thousand white settlers, called Boers. Less than 20 percent of the U.S. population in 1790 was black. By the time of the Great Trek – the mass exodus of Boers (*voortrekkers*) to the north and northeast – in 1836, about 40,000 non-Africans lived in South Africa, compared with 13,000,000 whites in the U.S. Whites never amounted to more than about 20 percent of South Africa's population. And, unlike their white counterparts in the U.S. – who trekked westward, decimating the Native American population – the voortrekkers of South Africa remained, by and large, cut off, and never really decimated the indigenous Africans, who proved to be more flexible than Native Americans (Hoagland, 1972, 22-23). The philosophical intent of apartheid was to provide for a secure white nation in a predominantly black South Africa.

While the southern U.S. stopped short of enforcing an apartheid racial system, many members of its bourgeois class were deeply rooted in the antebellum plantation order, which had dire consequences for blacks in the postbellum South. Following the abolition of slavery, a landed elite, to which Wright (1941, 1988, 12) referred to as "Lords of the Land," insisted upon a racial repressive labor system. In the U.S. Compromise of 1877, industrial capitalists of the North gave these landed elites a free hand over Southern blacks in return for trade and commerce between the two regions. One geographical consequence of the compromise was the Mississippi Delta, which, according to Rupert Vance (1935, 266), became the core of the South, "cotton-obsessed, Negro-obsessed, ... the deepest South, the heart of Dixie, America's superplantation belt."³ Another geographical consequence of the compromise was Birmingham, Alabama, where key industrialists with close ties to the class of landed elites built an industrial labor system based on the institution of slavery (Wilson, 2000a).

Similarly, the South African compromise of 1909 wedded British industrial capital to Afrikaner landed capitalism for the purpose of exploiting the labor of

³ Clyde Wood's recent (1998) critical analysis of this region tells us why, and in doing so analyzes the blues as a black musical form that arose out of this obsession in the Delta.

Africans. The more moderate English stance on South Africa's racial problems had begun to erode immediately after the English victory in the 1899 Boer War. Shortly afterward, the Afrikaners were given self-governing status, and in 1910 the Union of South Africa came into being. London appointed Louis Botha, an Afrikaner, as the Union's first Prime Minister. Taking advantage of decolonization occurring throughout Africa, the Afrikaners, along with the English-speaking section of the population, voted against staying in the British Commonwealth. In 1961, the Union became the Republic of South Africa. English-speaking South Africans no longer viewed themselves as "British," accepting increasingly Afrikaner attitudes on politics and race.

Under the Union of South Africa, white South Africans, like their 1877 white counterparts in the American South, saw the chance to remake the cultural landscape in their political and racial image, producing their own space. In the case of America, this landscape was capsulized in the rural landscape of the Mississippi Delta and in the urban landscape of Birmingham, and in the case of South Africa, in the urban landscape of Johannesburg. According to W. David Lewis (1994, 83), Birmingham produced

a particularly severe form of exploitation and social problems of enormous long-range consequence. Only in South Africa, where black workers burrowed for gold in the Main Reef, Johannesburg's equivalent of (Birmingham's) Red Mountain, and the Warrior coal beds, did a similar situation come about. Pictures taken in the 1880s of Birmingham and the faraway city on the Witwatersrand have an uncanny likeness.

Birmingham and Johannesburg

On the Rand, as on Birmingham's Red Mountain and in the Warrior coalfields, black men left the rural areas to work in the mines. Laws were passed that gave employers in both places greater control over black labor than would normally have occurred in a free labor market. That the industrial economies of both Birmingham and Johannesburg grew while racial segregation and separation intensified tell us a great deal about the relationship between industrial capitalism and race-connected practices. Speaking of apartheid South Africa, Hoagland (1972, 187) noted that "(t)he interrelationship of politics, economics, and race is so closely and delicately attuned that one does not know whether to speak of the politics of racial economy, or the economics of political racism." The same could be said of Birmingham, "America's Johannesburg."

No city had as notorious a reputation for its racial practices as did Birmingham—except perhaps Johannesburg (Wilson, 2000a). Given these practices, both cities became epicenters of the struggle for racial equality. The 1976 Soweto uprising just outside of Johannesburg reminded one of the fire hoses, dogs, and police turned on

black school-children in a Birmingham park by Eugene “Bull” Connor, the city’s Commissioner of Public Safety, thirteen years earlier.

Conclusion

In the post-civil rights, post-apartheid era, *overt* race-connected practices no longer characterize either the United States or South Africa. Global capitalism is the major structural and institutional force affecting black communities. Both W. E. B. Du Bois and Richard Wright realized the need for large narrative and analytic frameworks that are not monolithic and destructive of the black experience, yet are sufficient to engage in analysis of large structures or institutions. According to Mostern (2000, 78), Du Bois saw no inherent “contradiction between a broad Marxian framework of analysis and insistence on a carefully defined, identitarian, practical intellectual politics.”

To incorporate black identity politics into a Marxian framework of analysis, we must begin from the standpoint of race-connected practices in the lives of people, the particularity of the person, the body, how these concrete practices produced and reproduced themselves over time and space – how they, in fact, shaped and reshaped the world of both black and white bodies in actual praxes. We need to put the flesh of black experience on the skeleton of society at every geographical scale. When we do, we will find that blacks in the U.S. and South Africa may be more similar than different. We will not find, as Wright (1983, 63-64) put it, “Be like us and we will like you, maybe.” Instead, we will find: “If you possess enough courage to speak out (for) what you are, you will find that you are not alone.”

If we situate race-connected practices within the concrete historical and geographical conditions under which they unfold, we can find out who we are, the particularity of us. As Harvey (2000, 49) noted, “the universality of a class struggle originates with the particularity of the person and ... class politics must translate back to that person (and place) in meaningful ways.” Only through a critical analysis of race-connected practices can we find out what we share with others within and across geographical scales.

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