

Cornel West, Review of Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy and Society*. *Critical Sociology*, 13 (3) (1986), 114-115.

Manning Marable is the most visible and well-known black Marxist in the country. His syndicated column—the lone black socialist voice—appears in over 140 black and white newspapers in the USA and Britain. He lectures annually at over forty colleges and universities as well as at trade-union and black community centers. And he has played pivotal roles in the formation of the National Black Independent Political Party and more recently the Democratic Socialists of America. Presently, he is a Vice-Chair of the latter organization and editor of one of its unique publications, *Third World Socialists*.

Marable first burst on the intellectual scene with *From the Grassroots: Social and Political Essays Towards Afro-American Liberation* (1980). In this text, Marable outlined his “left black nationalist” position which combined a Marxist critique of American society with a black nationalist appreciation for the relative autonomy and basic dignity of Afro-American culture. In his next book, *Blackwater: Historical Studies in Race, Class Consciousness and Revolution* (1981), Marable put forward a schematic reconstruction of Afro-American history guided by his “left black nationalist” perspective. Inspired by the work and style of W.E.B. Du Bois, Marable intertwined poetic and historical discourses in order to disclose the subversive elements in the tradition of black radicalism and to discover how these elements could be more fully reactivated in our time. Both works were suggestive and provocative yet ultimately uneven owing to ambitious intent and incongruous execution.

There is no doubt that *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* (1983) goes far beyond his first two books. It overcomes the disparate character which plagued his earlier works by sustaining a cohesive portrait of black America. It also provides the most compelling depiction of the crisis of black America we have from a socialist perspective. Going beyond mere Leftist rhetoric which pervades so much of black Marxist discourse, Marable empirically examines the role and function of the black underclass, black working class, black women, black prisoners, black farmers, black entrepreneurs, black preachers and black Brahmins. In short, Marable attempts to lay bare the present-day anatomy of black America in a highly detailed manner.

The major strength of the book is the depths it reveals of the political and economic underdevelopment of black people in capitalist USA. Marable does not simply report the unemployment of over 50% of black youth, the astronomical collapse of black agricultural entrepreneurship, the 41.2% poverty rate of young black women householders, the 26.8% of high school graduates among the black poor or the 31,000 black families who had no cash income at all this past year. Rather Marable understands these facts in relation to the processes of underdevelopment historically generated and presently reinforced by the exploitative U.S. capitalist economy and its relatively autonomous racist and sexist operations.

Marable does not merely observe that a black man in the U.S. has a 6 to 8 times greater chance of being murdered than a white man, that every year over 8% of all Afro-Americans are arrested (comprising over 25 % of all Americans arrested in a given year!) or that almost half of all prisoners in the U.S. are black. Rather Marable views these figures in the context of the historic legacy of crypto-fascist Southern terror and racist

police violence against Afro-Americans in capitalist USA. Finally, though Marable lauds the efforts of black people to survive against overwhelming odds, he undermines the fashionable yet unwarranted claims that the black middle class—its politicians, businesspersons and preachers—constitute serious levers of power. Composing only 2.3% of all construction firm ownership, 0.4% of all wholesale trade ownership, 0.8 % of all real estate, insurance and finance company ownership, and only negligible presence in the management of corporate America, any claim of the presence of “black capitalism” is ludicrous.

Marable’s depiction of the crisis in black America leads him to suggest that the logical consequence of present processes of underdevelopment is the slow but sure genocide of the majority of Afro-Americans. This suggestion may indeed appear a bit paranoid. Yet it reflects the deep sense of urgency of a black Marxist. So what are the forces of resistance to transform this situation?

It is here that Marable’s own reliance on dependency theory misguides him. For Marable, the black poor, working class, women and prisoners constitute “the domestic periphery”: the black entrepreneurs, Brahmins, politicians and preachers, “the domestic core.” And though Marable never explicitly elaborates this point, following Andre Frank, Walter Rodney and others, he assumes that the core bears some causal relation, hence basic responsibility, to the periphery. Yet this analogy certainly does not hold for the black middle class who, for the most part, do not live at the expense of the black poor but rather are parasitic on corporate America and its state apparatus.

Following Marable’s model, the black middle class would constitute a mere slice of the semiperiphery whose development is arrested by racist and sexist barriers and whose dependence is reinforced by multi-national capitalism. Yet even this characterization is problematic. In fact, I

remain unconvinced that Wallerstein's language of core/periphery/semiperiphery even applies to Third World economies—so its application to black America is highly unwarranted. This is so, in part, because the language obscures the internal dynamics of the phenomena subsumed under each rubric and thereby violates a precious principle for any acceptable social analysis: the principle of historical specificity.

For example, Marable's analysis fails to grasp the dialectical role of the black middle class. He views their economic presence as negligible and their political power as merely symbolic. (p. 171). There surely are no reasons to rest emancipatory hopes on the black petit bourgeoisie, but to prematurely abandon it is ahistorical. This shortcoming is brought home in the major silence in the book: the role and function of black intellectuals, especially Marxist ones. This significant yet small portion of primarily the black petit bourgeoisie remains unexamined by Marable. These intellectuals can play a crucial role in the transformation of capitalist America—as does Marable himself in his writings and political affiliations—but precisely what is this role? How are we to understand it in relation to other forces of resistance in Afro-America and beyond?

These important questions are, of course, directed not only at Marable's text, but to the black Left as a whole. The crisis Marable has depicted—though not theoretically accounted for in a persuasive manner—has concrete consequences: at the cost of black lives daily. How can a convincing Marxist analysis grasp it and a credible socialist program speak to it with potency and power? Despite the impediments and blindnesses of dependency theory, Marable has gallantly attempted to grapple with this crucial query.