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**THE ORIGINS OF RACISM:
THE CRITICAL THEORY OF OLIVER C. COX**

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Oliver C. Cox's theory of race relations and its impending problems in connection with the rise of capitalism have not been applied or addressed to the same extent as that of his contemporaries. Why does the work of Oliver Cox continue to be largely ignored and set aside? We will first look at Cox's hypothesis and some of the concepts he uses, his argument regarding the genesis of racism, and his criticisms of some of his better known contemporaries that may well have contributed to the bitter relationships he encountered.

Introduction

The phenomenon of racism has been and continues to be an issue of concern for societies around the modern world. Today it is an issue to be dealt with daily in our news and in our neighborhoods. Various scholars and sociologists have presented theories to explain the genesis of and continued growth of racism in modern society. Some of the better known sociologists are Gunnar Myrdal, W.E.B. DuBois, Robert E. Park, and E. Franklin Frazier. One sociologist's theories of racism still lies dormant in the shadows of those theorists. Oliver C. Cox developed a competent and detailed theory of race relations and its impending problems in connection with the rise of capitalism, but his theories to this day are not applied or addressed to the same extent as those of the other sociologists.

Cox held the hypothesis that "racial exploitation and race prejudice developed among Europeans with the rise of capitalism and nationalism; and that because of the world-wide ramifications of capitalism, all racial antagonisms can be traced to the policies and attitudes of the leading capitalist people, the white people of Europe and North America" (Cox 1948:322). Cox developed this hypothesis around some principle concerns "differentiating his understanding of "race prejudice" from the other forms of social intolerance, tracing the historical origins of racial antagonism, and analyzing the situation of Negroes in the U.S. as an aspect of "political-class relations" (Thompson 1989:146).

I will look at some of the concepts Cox uses, his argument regarding the genesis of racism, the consequences of bearing a Marxist label, and review his criticisms of some of his better known contemporaries that may well have contributed to the bitter relationships he encountered.

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Definition of Concepts

Cox identified racial relationships on three levels, ethnocentrism, social intolerance, and racism. Ethnocentrism is the "we" feeling experienced by a society. It is the tendency to view the norms and values of one's culture as absolute and to use them as a standard against which to judge and measure all other cultures. Cox argued that it is a feeling that is common to all societies and that it maintains group solidarity, which does not necessarily make it a racial phenomenon.

Social intolerance is resentment against a subgroup that refuses to conform to the dominant group's practices and beliefs. It is often confused with race prejudice when it is directed toward a racially distinct group. Anti-semitism is often mistaken for racial prejudice, but it is a form of social intolerance. Cox believed that social intolerance is probably as old as social organization. Cox defines race for the sociologist as "any group of people believed to be and accepted as a race in any given area of ethnic competition" (Cox 1948:319).

What the sociologist should be most interested in, according to Cox, is the social interaction between these groups of people and the meanings and definitions they give to these situations. Race relations, for the purpose of this paper, can be defined as "that behavior that develops among... persons of different races...whose contacts are determined by a consciousness of racial difference"(Cox 1948:320). Cox maintains his hypothesis that racism, or racial antagonism, is the phenomenon of the capitalist exploitation of peoples and its complementary social attitude (Cox 1948:321). The dominant group exploits the racial minority for its labor and resources or both. It is an ideology of inferiority supported by presumed biological differences such as strength or intelligence. This ideology was necessary for the dominant group to justify and effectively exploit the racial minority. Cox believed that we would be in grave error if we thought that racism was an inherent instinct of antipathy between peoples. Cox also saw racial antagonisms as a political-class conflict. Cox believed it was important to understand that the phenomenon of racism had its rise only in modern times (Hunter and Abraham 1987:51). To support his argument, Cox goes to great lengths to trace the historical genesis of racism.

Historical Origins of Racism

Cox begins his historical review with the Greek culture. The Greeks were the first European people to enter the stream of eastern Mediterranean civilization. No other European empire extended itself as deeply as the Hellenistic empire into the territories of colored people until about the end of the fifteenth century. The Greeks had a cultural standard of division for people; there were no racial divisions even among people they conquered. The Greeks believed that they had a superior culture but wanted the "barbarians" to assimilate to the Greek culture. They encouraged the "barbarians" to acquire a working knowledge of the culture, especially the language, and as this was accomplished the

"barbarians" could freely intermarry with the Greeks. This assimilation provided full inclusion in the Greek culture.

The Roman empire was structured as a cultural class system, and the basic distinction was Roman citizenship. Conquered peoples were enslaved, but did not hold a racial stigma, for citizenship was granted upon liberation. The Romans, like the Greeks, encouraged assimilation to their culture. Once assimilated, the enslaved people were included in the culture as full citizens with all the same rights as natural Roman citizens and were even allowed to hold high positions in government.

After the fall of the Roman empire, Cox sees Western culture enter a period of gestation "with the rise of the politico-religious system of Christianity" (Cox 1948:325). There were general patterns of barbaric invasions, but still there is no racial prejudice evident again the criterion of belonging was a cultural one. In the Middle Ages, no racial antagonisms were evident in Europe the main divisions of people were Christian and non-Christian, and conversion was allowed and encouraged. The Europeans were "at this time more isolated and ignorant about foreign peoples and world geography than the Romans and Greeks were" (Cox 1948:326). Gradually Europe began to explore new lands for commercial purposes and religious beliefs of salvation of the heathen peoples. Cox marks the first crusade as a starting point that led to European world domination. The period between the first crusades and the discovery of America, according to Cox, "continued to be characterized by the religious view of world order that...set a pattern of dealing with non-Christian peoples which is ...continued to this day ...minus only its religious characteristics" (Cox 1948:326). While the religious controls were maintained, no racial antagonisms developed; "but a Jew-heathen-infidel antagonistic complex developed that would affect European thought for some centuries"(Cox 1948:326).

The need for trade induced the Portuguese in the fifteenth century to start their way down the African coasts. This brought them in contact with the Moors and "heathens", which to the Portuguese were inferior because they were non-Christians, and the Portuguese set out to convert them into Christians which would make them their equals. Their obsession with the spiritual conversion allowed the negroes to be integrated into the general population. Cox stressed "that this matter of cultural conversion is crucial for our understanding of the development of racial antagonism" (Cox 1948:328). A dominant group would have to devise ways to limit the subgroups' (minority) cultural assimilation to profitably exploit them. As long as the Portuguese assimilated the "heathens" into their population, race prejudice was inhibited.

The discovery of America can be viewed as the next step in the history of race relations. Bourgeois economic thought began to dominate the attention of the new-founded nation. Affecting this change in thought, according to Cox, was the declining influence of the Roman Catholic church with its warnings and inhibitions against free exploitation of economic resources and the increasing competition of European nations for economic exploitation of this newly

discovered land. Cox believed that racial antagonism achieved its full maturity by the end of the nineteenth century, when Europe was beginning to explain its economic intentions of dominating weaker European counterparts with ..."subtle theories of racial superiority and masterhood"(Hunter and Abraham 1987:57). Cox also notes that "slave trade was simply a way of recruiting labor for the purpose of exploiting the great natural resources of America" (Cox 1948:332).

This for Cox marks the beginning of modern race relations. It was not some inherent feeling of "mutual antipathy between groups," but practical exploitation of a subgroup for capitalistic economic gain for the dominating group (Cox 1948:332). At the onset of slavery the color of one's skin was not the deciding factor for enslavement, it was rather a matter of having a sufficient number of workers for the heavy labor required in the fields. Cox also states that if there were a sufficient number of white workers available, they would have been substituted as it was in the West Indies mainland, where in fact white workers did work in servile positions, defined in the same terms as were used to characterize the African workers in America. Of crucial significance to Cox was the fact that "racial exploitation was only one aspect of the problem of the proletarianization of labor, regardless of the color of the laborer" (Cox 1948:333). Cox relates racial antagonism to a political-class conflict. For the capitalist to keep this commodity of labor exploitive, ways to keep it exploitable must be devised. Race prejudice then became an important device to hinder the assimilation of the minority because assimilation would diminish the exploitative possibilities of this group. From this point on there were and still are many sermons and books published trying "to prove the incapacity for cultural conversion of exploitable peoples" (Cox 1948:335).

Bearing a Marxist Label

Oliver Cox has been regarded as a Marxist by many sociologists since his first publications, and this image has endured to this day. Cox believed that the "social scientist should be accurate and objective but not neutral; he should be passionately partisan in favor of the welfare of the people and against the interests of the few when they seem to submerge that welfare and that the reason for the existence of the social scientist is that his scientific findings contribute to the betterment of the people's well-being" (Cox 1948:xvi).

The argument in this section will focus on considering Cox "as an intellectual radical who responded to and drew upon a wide array of thinkers and ideas to develop his own independent contributions to race relations, social stratification and capitalism" (Hunter 1983:2).¹ To lay bare the facts and expose the mystifications of class ideology and sociological theorizing was for Cox the duty of the sociologist (Hunter 1983:2). Cox often accused his sociological peers of carrying on research for the purpose of career mobility and being influenced by the status quo of conservatism, which caused them to focus on microscopic problems, ignoring the analysis of the whole social structure. This,

Cox believed, kept them biased in favor of the capitalist system and kept them from working on a direction for social change and to demonstrate a possibility of a new social order.

In Cox's earlier works such as *Caste, Class and Race* and other works dating from 1942 to 1948, it is evident that he relied on Marxian concepts for his frames of reference. But in his later works such as *The Foundations of Capitalism* (1959), *Capitalism and American Leadership* (1962) and *Capitalism as a System* (1964), which is a trilogy of volumes on capitalism, it is often overlooked that he goes beyond traditional class analysis and develops a world system perspective of capitalism, which puts him in opposition with Marx's conceptual scheme (Hunter 1983:2). Cox points out that Marx was preoccupied with the class struggle between capital and labor and believed that capitalism existed within an essentially closed society, which prevented him from seeing the more global nature of the capitalist system (Hunter 1983:13). Also, Marx's emphasis on the labor theory of value and lack of attention on the imperialist nature of capitalism prevented him from seeing capitalist leadership as being important in world system terms. We also find Cox in opposition with Marx's theory of alienation. All work was alienating for Cox, in the sense that no one likes to work for the sake of working (Hunter 1983:20). In the capitalist society, according to Cox, alienation was not alienation from production, but alienation from alternative chances for employment. Marxist theory was an important tool for Cox that addressed critical questions of the social order that was not then found in American sociology. Cox was very precise in explaining that "Marxism was only a means of formulating a critical point of view, not a definitive explanation on how a society operated" (Hunter 1983:5). Cox stated:

In the interest of historical perspective it is important that the assertions be known to have been emphasized by Marx, but, in so far as its scientific validity as a social fact is in question, Marx has nothing whatsoever to do with it. At best, Marxian hypotheses are 'servants, not masters' ...if, therefore, parts of this study seem Marxian, it is not because we have taken the ideas of this justly famous writer as gospel, but because we have not discovered any other that could explain the Facts so consistently (Cox 1948:xi).

"Cox found it ironic that those social scientists of his generation who professed an objective and scientific social science were inclined toward orthodoxy themselves in their bias against the theories of Marx and in their adherence to mainstream theories and methods"(Hunter 1983:5). For anyone to reflect critically on American society, there was a price to be paid, and Cox knew this especially if it meant being seen as a Marxist. This went as far as to affect Cox's ability to be published, as one editor responded to reading one of his unpublished works: "Dear Professor Cox: It's no use, I can't stomach the

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communist line. Sincerely Yours, Wm. B. Selgby" (Hunter 1983:23). Cox does not avoid the issue of the unpopular Marxian theory as he states below:

In considering the behavior of 'political classes' it has been practically impossible to ignore the work of Karl Marx and that of some of his associates; indeed, there should be no need to ignore them. In capitalist societies still, the very name of Karl Marx is ordinarily anathema; consequently, unless the writer takes a position opposite to that of Marx, he is likely not to be heard. Nevertheless, it seems that interpretations of social data should be allowed to stand on their merits -- and this regardless of whether Marx ever lived. If social science has any claim at all to be science, it should at least refrain from distilling social data through a context of designedly developed, popular prejudices. We may be able, for instance, to demolish a certain chair of social logic merely by stereotyping it "Marxian," yet this achievement shows neither that the reasoning is untenable nor even that we have taken the trouble to understand it (Cox 1948 as quoted in Hunter 1983: 4-5).

Critiques by Cox

Not only to be criticized, Cox did his fair share of critiquing other sociologists' work. We will briefly look at some published and better-known critiques.

In his article, "Max Weber on Social Stratification: A Critique" (Cox 1950), Cox finds that Weber often universalizes his meanings of the concepts of class, social status, and caste. Weber's approach was non-dynamic and highly abstract. Because of this, "Weber almost never refers his concept to non-market societies, and he illustrates class action primarily as struggles within social systems rather than between social systems" (Cox 1950:227). But Cox does not totally write off Weber's theory of social stratification he does find Weber's distinction between "communal" and "societal" class action a useful concept in understanding the process of class struggles (Cox 1950:227). In short Cox feels that Weber's discussion of social stratification is "too generalized and inconsistent to be of any considerable value as a source of fundamental suggestions in understanding the phenomena" (Cox 1950:227).

In "*An American Dilemma: A Mystical Approach to the Study of Race Relations*" (Cox 1945), we find Cox in disagreement with Dr. Gunnar Myrdal and his publication *An American Dilemma*. Myrdal's work was one of the first and most complete studies on the state of race relations in the United States at the time. Cox was opposed to Myrdal's hypothesis that race relations in the U.S. were actually caste systems. Cox accused Myrdal of producing a piece of work that was acceptable to the "liberalist intelligentsia" and that it was propaganda in favor of the status quo (Cox 1945:132). It explains race relations away from the social and economic orders, which is what Cox based his theories on. Cox went further to say that Myrdal, having no clear conception of the norm that he was using to interpret the social phenomenon of race relations,

resorted to mysticism in an attempt to explain it. Cox sums up his critical examination of Myrdal's work by concluding that "Myrdal developed no consistent theory or hypothesis of race relations and the extent that he uses the caste belief in interpretation...is misleading"(Cox 1945:148). Cox goes on further to say, "Myrdal also goes out of his way to avoid the obvious implications of labor exploitation in the South" (Cox 1945:148).

This critique caused much controversy and put Cox at odds with most of his sociological peers since many of them subscribed to this caste school of thought. Many of Cox's critiques deal with the issue of caste vs. race in the United States since that was the dominant argument of the day. Gerald D. Berreman's article, "Caste in India and the United States" (Berreman 1960), was also subjected to Cox's scrutiny. Cox finds that Berreman "does not recognize a distinction between membership in a caste and belonging to a racial group by birth; between paternalism in caste relations, feudal-estate relations, labor relations, and race relations; or between hypergamy in race relations and caste relations" (Cox 1961:510). He accuses Berreman of conceptually restructuring the Hindu society so as to construct an equation of caste with race relations in the American South by defining the caste system as "a hierarchy of endogamous division in which membership is hereditary and permanent" (Cox 1961:510). "But his two groups of castes, twice-born and untouchables, to which he frequently refers as "the high caste" and the "low caste" respectively, are manifestly not a hierarchy" (Cox 1961:510). Cox contends that no insight is gained from Berreman's article, only confusion. Cox believed that "the caste system was not a simple societal trait, which may be universalized by "cross-cultural comparison"(Cox 1961:511).

Cox's Contributions

Cox was one of the first American sociologists to construct a major critique of the caste theory of race relations that prevailed in American social science in the 1940s (Hunter 1983:).² Because of this we can refer to Cox's efforts in this area as being "responsible for many of the present qualifications used by sociologists when describing the caste status of racial or sexual groups, where terms such as "caste-like" and "racial-caste" are increasingly being used" (Hunter 1983:20). Another aspect that is given little credit is that Cox's conception of capitalism as a world-system predates the world system theory by almost two decades. Cox's approach is similar to that of the contemporary world system, which demonstrates the importance of not only focusing on internal dynamics of a capitalist society, but on the global dynamics of the capitalist system as well (Hunter 1983:21).

Cox may very well be continued to be viewed as a Marxist unless new literature demands attention to dispute this label. His unorthodox sociology kept him to stay clear of mainstream and institutional sociology, which caused him to be greatly ignored. Though Cox did employ a Marxist concept in his early

writings, later works showed his attempts to go beyond Marx and distinguish his perspective from Marxian writers. We should view Cox as a prophet, attempting to address issues that were of great public concern and critical of American sociological thought.

Endnotes

1. This section relies heavily on Herbert M. Hunter's article "Oliver C. Cox: Marxist or Intellectual Radical?" which is a condensed work from his dissertation, "The Life and Work of Oliver C. Cox," Department of Sociology, Boston University, January, 1981.
2. Hunter notes that there was only one other criticism refuting at any length the caste idea in the 1940s: Maxwell R. Brooks, "American Class and Caste: An Appraisal," *Social Forces*, Vol. 25 (December, 1946), pp. 207-211. Hunter goes on to clarify that this article relies heavily on Cox's critique of caste.

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CHANGING WOMEN'S WORKPLACE STATUS: ALONE OR TOGETHER?

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This review essay concerns what employed women can do to change their situation in the world of paid work. Now a perennial issue for women as well as men--going it alone versus mobilizing co-workers, assessment of several recent studies (Hertz 1986; Milkman 1987; Blum 1991; Paules 1991; McIlwee and Robinson 1992) from this perspective, chosen for the variety of occupations they represent, present very different ideas on this topic. The solutions which researchers, or the women they studied, pursue may be structural, cultural, or individual. Although the basic problem is essentially the same in each study--the lack of equity for women, researchers also arrive at different explanations of the problem, likewise structural, cultural, or individual. The objectives of this review essay are to: (1) map the variety of explanations and solutions; (2) examine the extent to which an author's explanation and solution are analytically consistent, and then characterize the researcher's philosophical stance on a continuum from voluntarist to determinist; and (3) in conclusion, speculate as to the reasons for the obvious variation among these occupational case studies of employed women. The following table summarizes our analysis.

Each study investigates a particular workplace problem. Referring to a period in the recent past, Milkman examines gender segregation in the World War II work force, exposing myths of the time about women's work and explaining the differences between the electrical and automotive industries. In reverse status order of contemporary workers, Paules shows how waitresses find power and autonomy actively resisting workplace controls. Blum examines the intersection of two social movements, labor and women's, identifying the pitfalls and possibilities of comparable worth. Hertz deconstructs the glamorous dual-career corporate marriage to its precarious social base. McIlwee and Robinson discover a male culture of engineering that women engineers must negotiate in order to succeed.

Explanations and Solutions: Structural, Cultural, or Individual?

Factory Workers during and after World War II. While gender segregation in factory jobs existed throughout the war, Milkman concentrates on postwar labor struggles. In the automotive industry before the war women were hired only as upholsterers. Although they filled many men's jobs during the war, afterward management attempted to return to the prewar policy of exclusion (pp. 130-37).