

On the Very Idea of a Black Radical Tradition

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It is arguable that the idea of a radical *tradition* has long been an important dimension of modern black intellectual life, shaping the constructions and reconstructions of ethical-political connection across the rupturing history of black dispossession, displacement, and disenfranchisement. But what is the meaning of this idea? Or, better, to give it a Wittgensteinian inflection, what conceptual-ideological *labor* does the idea of a black radical tradition produce in the varying contexts of its contemporary *use*? What discursive *work* has it performed in presents past? Indeed, is there a genealogy waiting to be written about the idea of a black radical tradition that would traverse—and therefore connect—the discontinuous uses to which it has been put in the historical times and geopolitical spaces of black intellectual life? And if we take these questions at least in part to inhabit a *normative* discursive space, that is, not merely a descriptive but also an *argumentative* space in which what is at stake are *claims* on the moral-political present, what *ought* we do with the idea of a black radical tradition?

Part of the attractiveness, perhaps, of the idea of a *tradition* that is “black” and “radical” is the way in which it offers an idiom of *belonging*, a vantage from which to narrate a *shared* past and a perspective from which to imagine a *common* future. But in that sense, surely the generativeness (or otherwise) of the idea of a “black radical tradition” depends, in some measure, on how we think of each of the constitutive terms of this formulation: *black*, *radical*, and *tradition*. And already the conceptual and ideological *complexity* of the problem at hand becomes apparent since each of these terms is, in W. B. Gallie’s phrase of more than a

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half century ago, an “essentially contested concept.”¹ That is to say, they are, each of them, susceptible to widespread disagreement or rival interpretations that cannot be settled by mere appeal to empirical evidence or canons of logic. For, to begin with, it is by no means self-evident what identity or what community or what history is covered by the term *black*. Surely *black* does not simply correspond to an a priori foundation, an ontology, that guarantees a unified way of being or seeing. We are reminded of the provocative questions that frame Jean Genet’s *Les nègres*: “What exactly is a black? First of all, what is his color?”² Similarly, *radical* is an idea no less complex, no less ambiguous (“radical” as opposed to what?), if also no less important to the story of the modern black subject. But in the constrained aftermaths of the various black nationalisms, black Marxisms, the Cold War, and so on, what idea of politics does *radical* signify or organize? It is not easy to say with any certainty. And finally, what idea of a “tradition” does the idea of a black radical tradition depend upon? *Tradition* is a term with a complex and contested genealogy. Indeed, some would argue that *tradition* does not belong in the same semantic universe as *radical*, appearing as it does to be the very reverse of subversion or transgression. What relation between past, present, and future does a tradition comprehend? What notion of temporality and spatiality does it map? What assumptions about gender does it conjure up? And yet, curiously, however contested, there seems a persisting demand for *some* notion of a tradition that is black and radical (implicit or explicit, marginal or central) in organizing the strategies of criticism within the discursive arena of black intellectual life, some stubborn *grain* against which to position our dissent, a recognition perhaps that even in our attempts to disengage from the claims of tradition we are nevertheless *oriented* by it.

Conventionally of course, we have by and large inherited from the Enlightenment a predisposition to be suspicious of the idea of a tradition, inasmuch as it seems to run counter to the progressive self-image of our age; it seems to suggest an orientation *opposed* to reason, *prior* to modernity, *immune* to conflict and change, and *intolerant* of diverse perspectives. To speak in the name of tradition appears automatically to sanction dogma, conservatism, an unthinking surrender to the blind, coercive strictures of community.

One dissenting approach to this conventional conception of a tradition that has seemed to me especially helpful is the one Alasdair MacIntyre has been sketching over a number of years in his attempt to think a practice of moral inquiry or social criticism driven neither by an objectivist outside (one or another version of universalism) nor by specious inside (one or another version of nativism). For MacIntyre, the conventional notion of a tradition as conservative or unitary is mistaken or anyway certainly depends on our acquiescence to a false

1 See W. B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” in *Philosophy and Historical Understanding*, 2nd ed. (New York: Schocken, 1968), 157–91.

2 See Jean Genet, *Les nègres: Clownerie* (Décines, France: Marc Barbezat, 1958), n.p. “Un soir,” Genet writes, “un comédien me demanda d’écrire une pièce qui serait jouée par des noirs. Mais, qu’est-ce que c’est donc un noir? Et d’abord, c’est de quelle couleur?”

opposition between progress and custom, between reason and tradition. To the contrary, for MacIntyre *all* reasoning, including the Enlightenment's, is to be understood as taking place in the discursive context of a tradition of moral argument.³ On his view, a tradition is first of all a socially embodied and historically extended discursive terrain on which the identity of a community is *argued* out. (Note the accent on *argument*.) Who are "we"? What pasts have made "us" who we are? What "events" make up our common story? What projects can make us who we might be in the future? These are the stuff of productive historical dispute. A tradition, then, is a contentious dramatic narrative that seeks to make a connection, through a distinctive temporal style of reasoning, between pasts, presents, and futures, and between identity and community.

But traditions are more than temporal modes of narrativization; they are also modes of *authorization*, in two senses: in Hannah Arendt's sense that they are properly speaking neither modes of persuasion nor modes of coercion but discursive modes that seek nevertheless to give our human world *durability*; and in Talal Asad's sense that they are modes that seek to *preempt* the space of rival discourses of identity and community, of pasts, presents, futures.⁴ Consequently, traditions are never neutral with respect to the values they embody or the ideals and norms they commend. Rather, traditions seek to make claims on what is to *count* and what is not among the possible diversity of goods and virtues and excellences; to take a stand on what is to be valued, preserved, transmitted, inculcated, remembered; and to construct and shelter the practices and institutions that are thought to enable the achievement of their preferred modes of human flourishing.

On this view, traditions are essentially contentious. The contention presupposes that there is something held in common—a way of life, a god, a traumatic origin, a distinctive history, a unique language—but this common possession (in Michael Walzer's phrase) does not presuppose agreement, a uniformity of perspective, an ultimate consensus.⁵ On MacIntyre's account, a tradition with a single point of view is already an incoherent or lapsed tradition. Thus what constitutes a tradition is "a conflict of interpretations of that tradition, a conflict which itself has a history susceptible of rival interpretations." And these arguments, further, will be at once epistemological and moral. "For it is not merely that different participants in the tradition will disagree," claims MacIntyre. "They will also disagree as to how to characterize their disagreements and as to how to resolve them. They disagree as to what constitutes appropriate reasoning, decisive evidence, and conclusive proof."⁶

3 There are a number of places where MacIntyre discusses tradition. One of the earliest was his essay "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science" (1977), now collected in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3–23; but of course it is in *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) that he offers an initial full sketch, followed by *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

4 See Hannah Arendt, "What Is Authority?," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 91–142; and Talal Asad, "Anthropology and the Analysis of Ideology," *Man*, n.s., 14 (1979): 607–27.

5 Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 32.

6 MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises," 11.

On this view of a tradition, if I am black it is because there is an historical tradition in which that identity is constituted partly by a continuous argument over precisely what it means to be black. This is why I have argued, many years ago now, that one way of thinking about a black cultural and intellectual tradition is that it is discursively constituted in and through a distinctive common possession, namely, the tropes of “Africa” and “Slavery.”⁷ Each of these figures, of course, concatenates around itself a whole historical archive of metaphoric and metonymic resources. On this view, “Africa” and “Slavery” are not only ethnographic or historical realities but also semiotically inexhaustible figures that help to organize and authorize a social imaginary of historical identity and community. They do not constitute a unified social imaginary, of course, a social imaginary over which there is—or can be—complete agreement; but they shape a pervasive social imaginary, nevertheless, in which the conflicts of interpretation within and across the temporality of generations only serve to underline the common possession of a distinctive past in the present.

Now here, briefly sketched, is one illustrative moment in the discursive arena of a black radical tradition that suggests just this kind of pervasive conflict of interpretation around the figure of Africa. In 1972, as everybody knows, Bogle-L’Ouverture in London and Tanzania Publishing House in Dar-es-Salaam published Walter Rodney’s seminal and soon-to-be indispensable *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. As a work of scholarship and as a work of intervention, the book was an intellectual-political event, of course, because in the idiom of a black Marxism (as, say, Cedric Robinson and Robin Kelley might think of it)⁸ it opened up a conceptual space in which to think the anti-imperialist and socialist implications of Europe’s exploitation of Africa and its transplantation and enslavement of its peoples in the New World. Less well known, however, is that in 1973 the little remembered but enormously important *Bulletin of the African Studies Association of the West Indies*, edited at the time by Maureen Warner (now Maureen Warner-Lewis), published a number of responses to Rodney’s book.⁹ One was an avowedly “Marxist” reading offered by Rupert Lewis; a second was an “economic assessment” written by Norman Girvan; and a third, by Kenneth Hall, was concerned with African historiography. But the response that I would like to pause over briefly here is the one written by Edward Kamau Brathwaite, titled, suggestively, “Dialect and Dialectic.” Rodney and Brathwaite, I think, are helpful figures through which to grasp the conflict of interpretations that constitute a black radical tradition.

7 See David Scott, “An Obscure Miracle of Connection,” in *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 106–27.

8 See Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of Black Radical Tradition* (1983; repr., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), and Robin Kelley’s foreword to this edition (xi–xxvi).

9 See “Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*: Four Comments,” *Bulletin of the African Studies Association of the West Indies*, no. 6 (December 1973): 77–99. This section of the *Bulletin* grew out of a December 1972 seminar organized to discuss the book. Maureen Warner-Lewis would go on to make a singular contribution to the idea of a black radical tradition, in work such as *Guinea’s Other Suns: The African Dynamic in Trinidad Culture* (Dover, MA: Majority, 1991).

Again, I am being brief here, and schematic. Like the other discussants in this issue of the *Bulletin*, Brathwaite is full of praise for Rodney's book, recognizing it for the intervention it aimed to be. As he put it, in his inimitable way, it is "truly revolutionary scholarship: history as teach, as thought, as verbal bomb and bullet: designed to refute and make the way clear for rightful building." In particular he sees in Rodney's image of Shaka—a figure of authentic African freedom as the realization of environmental potential—the "deep-set heartbeat of the book."¹⁰ There is something there of compelling wonder—the "Guyanese imagination"—to which Brathwaite is drawn. But he nevertheless has a profound doubt about the entire framework within which the problem of the colonization of Africa is conceived, namely, Rodney's developmentalism. For however "humanized" Rodney's Hegelian dialectic and however "sensitized" his Marxist progressivism, they remain for Brathwaite mere categories in the inevitablist schema of a European story of modernization that obscures (at best) or mocks (at worst) a deeper understanding of the cultural idioms of an African temporality. "Over and over," Brathwaite laments, "we find our brother, trapped within his modernist/progressive dialectic, talking about the escalation of African societies from their primitive structures into something newer, more complex, more 'efficient' (i.e., exploitative of resources, less subsistent, less like their original model)."¹¹ In other words, paradoxically, Rodney's impressive dialectic had led him to draw a picture of Africa in some respects not far removed from the colonial one he aimed to overthrow. Here is how Brathwaite closes his reflections: "So as much as I appreciate Rodney's thorough breadth of scholarship, his method and crucially popular technique of communication, I am equally concerned with this book's residual image. If we the oppressed cannot have a viable value system, revelatory as well as revolutionary, capable of recouping itself after defeat, like Jamaican Maroons, like Vietcong, where are we? . . . My maroon comments here concern not this brother's achievement, which quietly shines forth, but the feel and texture of this particular work: the need for some dialect to go along with the dialectic."¹²

Now, my concern here is obviously not to suggest that in this particular Caribbean conflict over interpretation of the African past Brathwaite is right and Rodney wrong. Far from it: after all, if Rodney's revolutionary dialectic needed a *cultural* dose of dialect, one could just as easily have said, in those heady days of the Caribbean 1970s, that Brathwaite's appreciation of dialect (in, say, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820*, published the year before Rodney's book) sorely needed a *political* regimen of dialectic. In any case it would take a closer more elaborate reading to arrive at judgments of this sort. My limited point, rather, is to gesture at the senses in which Rodney and Brathwaite here map rival positions within a black radical *tradition*, that they are engaged in contending interpretations of what is equally perceived to be a common possession, namely, the present of an African past, and

10 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "Dialect and Dialectic," *Bulletin of the African Studies Association of the West Indies*, no. 6 (December 1973): 89, 90.

11 *Ibid.*, 92.

12 *Ibid.*, 98–99.

that an authoritative reading of that common possession has implications for how we think about the aftermaths of colonial slavery and the place of African culture in the moral shaping of contemporary black identity.

At any rate, this is *one* direction of thinking the conceptual problem of a black radical tradition. It is a direction I favor but it is obviously not the *only* one. Still, it was the provocation that brought together a number of scholars at a conference called “The Idea of a Black Radical Tradition,” convened at Columbia University on 22 and 23 April 2011.¹³ What we sought to offer over the two days of reasoning that constituted this occasion was a critical platform on which to explore—and clarify—the conceptual and historical and political range of this recurrent idea of a black radical tradition. The discussions, needless to say, were stimulating, suggesting how important a value *disagreement* is for intellectual engagement, especially intellectual engagement that touches identity. We were not interested in producing, in the end, a final unifying coherence around the idea of a black radical tradition but in critically inquiring into its past and present uses so as to gain some critical purchase on its future possibilities. Several of the participants were, alas, unable to offer revised essays for publication. They are much missed (you can hear some of their voices in the roundtable). But the essays assembled here bring to the topic a rich range of animating perspectives and thematic preoccupations. As usual I refrain from editorial summary. The essays do the varied work they do—largely skeptical work, it is true, keeping intimate company with the idea of a tradition that is at once radical and black, but never simply, never passively, never with a direct, unconsidered embrace or an unquestioning affirmation. Indeed, as the reader will undoubtedly recognize, it is precisely this attitude of agonistic community—captured vividly in Nijah Cunningham’s image of a “broken bridge”—that holds open the prospect of living with the tension between our inheritance and our autonomy, of thinking with the visible sutures that render intelligible the histories of irreparable rupture and the aspirations for and against belonging that, among other things, keep the very argument about a black radical tradition in perpetual motion.

13 Once again I would like to thank the following entities at Columbia University for making this conference possible: the Office of the Executive Vice-President for Arts and Sciences, the Institute for Research in African-American Studies, the Department of Anthropology, and the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. I would also like to thank the following students: Nijah Cunningham for assisting with the planning and execution of the conference and for leading and shaping the roundtable; Nikolas Sparks for advising on many intellectual and logistical matters; and Tania Balan-Gaubert, Irvin Hunt, Laurie Lambert, Imani Owens, Mariel Rodney, April Simpson, Brittney Taylor, and Autumn Womack for undertaking various introductions during the conference. Finally I would like to thank Brent Hayes Edwards for his suggestive closing remarks.