

Black Power and the New Left: The Dialectics of Liberation, 1967

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The formulation of a viable leftist position has always been a dialectical process, its specific character most immediately differentiated from its past and future variants by the pressing social crises of its historical moment. This was the case with the heterogeneous New Left, and remains the case today. At the same time, every committed leftist is necessarily interested in the genealogy of leftism: its key figures and concepts; its historical traditions of protest, revolution, and liberation; and its accounts of the complex relationship between theory and praxis. While there are many positive attributes of this archaeological dimension of leftist thought, there is also a very real danger involved. Particularly in times of great political crisis, the legacies of leftist history can be transformed from meaningful engagements with the real conditions of existence to a small collection of precious shopworn artifacts, familiar touchstones that come to stand in for the far richer and more complex legacy of leftist efforts at social action and commitment. As major anniversaries lead us to more and more encounters with reflections on the historical legacies of the New Left (sometimes now even more narrowly identified by the increasingly burdened signifier of "1968"), the impulse can be to fall prey to figuration, converting historical realities into occasions for leftist nostalgia and simplification. Part of the project of left history should be to seek out those moments and scrutinize the social and political forces that brought that figuration and simplification into

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being so that we are perhaps less likely to fall prey to those same impulses in our current moment of danger.

In the summer of 1967, the Congress of the Dialectics of Liberation brought together in London critical theorists, political activists, poets, Marxists, anarchists, existential psychiatrists, and a broad spectrum of other leftist and countercultural figures, among them C. L. R. James, Paul Goodman, Allen Ginsberg, Angela Davis, Lucien Goldmann, and Gregory Bateson. Organized by David Cooper and R. D. Laing, both of whom were prominent figures in the 1960s anti-psychiatry movement that counted Foucault and Deleuze among its most recognizable adherents, the conference was devoted to a wide-ranging engagement with a diverse range of leftist issues, including debates on the future of capitalism, the role of violence in modern dissent, the possibility of revolution and liberation, and nascent forms of radical ecology and environmentalism. The intended purpose of the conference was to bring together leading leftist figures in an effort to create, as its organizers hoped, “a genuine revolutionary consciousness by fusing ideology and action on the levels of the individual and of mass society.”¹

In what follows, I want to examine one particularly rich example by focusing on the rhetorical paths of thought of two important figures of the New Left, both of whom participated in the Congress in 1967: Stokely Carmichael, honorary prime minister of the Black Panther Party, and Frankfurt School theorist and philosopher Herbert Marcuse. For all of their particular theoretical and political differences — differences that are representative of the ideological range of the conference itself — the Black nationalist and the German theorist shared, in their contributions to the conference and elsewhere, an abiding interest in looking to the historical crisis of chattel slavery, as well as its most prominent critic in the nineteenth century, Frederick Douglass, as one of the means by which to understand and articulate a critical political position in the era of the New Left. What specific functions did historical chattel slavery, the rhetorical figure of “the slave,” and Frederick Douglass in particular serve for these prominent figures of the New Left at this crucial moment in history? What accounts for this particular similarity in their symbolic imaginaries, and how does this matter for us today? For all of their faults, the legacies of Carmichael’s Black Power movement and Marcuse’s call for liberation from the affluent society could still conceivably serve as potential sources for a renewal of the left, which at the moment often works from several problematic premises: that racial politics are either a deviation from the real economic and class crises that drive forms of global oppression or an atavistic remnant of a time before civil rights movements had by and large “solved” the most egregious problems of racism in the United States and elsewhere; and that the Marcusean “Great

Refusal” is theoretically naïve, an embarrassing relic of 1960s counterculture rather than a systemic rejection of actually existing conditions.

But these accounts don’t quite suffice. As is evident in their contributions to the Dialectics of Liberation conference and elsewhere, both Carmichael and Marcuse are committed to exposing the forms of oppression endemic to the institutionalized norms and practices of white, Western, or “advanced” nations. In addition to criticizing the many naked displays of racism and violence, for example, Carmichael is also extremely critical of the ideology of white liberalism, which he characterizes as “sympathetic [to the cause of black struggle] in an empty sense,” missing the big picture of the institutional forms to which its adherents contribute, despite their “good intentions.” Sympathetic white liberals may hold radically different views on race than those held by whites who are openly racist or discriminatory, but in Carmichael’s view this does not automatically absolve them of their complicity with more insidious institutional forms of oppression — practices that also persist because of inaction or apathy on the part of “sympathetic souls” and not merely because of the existence of a small minority of openly racist citizens. Marcuse, in like fashion, is critical of the ideals of what he calls “pure tolerance,” which can also serve to further entrench institutional forms of oppression.² Both men see the emerging postcolonial movements in the Third World as powerful social and political forces capable of taking up the mantle of the revolutionary cause, given their unique position as the primary casualty of Western “civilization,” which both men likewise expose for its barbarism. As both men recognize, the subjection of colonial peoples is the very thing that has allowed contemporary Western society to blossom into its current affluent and hegemonic forms, which are thus incapable of creating structures free from the forms of exploitation that brought them to global dominance. And in some of their most withering critiques of contemporary socioeconomic developments, both Carmichael and Marcuse note how blacks and other minorities have traditionally been actively excluded from any significant access to “resource control,” or what Marcuse identifies as “the productive process” — in other words, access to capital.³

Carmichael in particular is more engaged with economic and structural issues than accounts of the Black Power movement generally allow, and his putatively inflammatory rhetoric is often as hesitant and ambivalent as it is angry and forceful. For all of his charged language about the potentially explosive political power of black America and the countless oppressed peoples of the post-colonial Third World (with whom black Americans could clearly identify), Carmichael, in his speech on “Black Power” at the conference, is at the same time dismissive of any utopian conceptions of historical progress in any strictly Hegelian or Marxist sense. Instead, his arguments are

peppered with the language of active resistance as a fundamental aspect of the revolutionary call to arms against the privileged caste of white America. While the radical program for black empowerment that he espouses is certainly intended to improve the lives of black Americans and other racial minorities around the globe, there is never any indication in his argument that such transformations will constitute “progress” from the standpoint of human history, insofar as Carmichael insists that human nature contains such poisonous elements as racism as part of its very being. What Carmichael calls the inherited subconscious racism of whites is a major factor in his skepticism.

In *Black Power*, published the same year, Carmichael would expand on the themes outlined in his speech at the London conference, and would identify one of the most devastating primary effects of the economic forms of institutionalized racism. As he notes, with more than a little anger, “Nowhere are people so expendable in the forward march of corporate power as the ghetto.”⁴ This is an indictment of far more than a handful of lynch mobs; it is, instead, a scathing criticism of an entire national socioeconomic apparatus and the subconscious racism that allows it to persist. As he argued in his speech at the conference, America’s history of slavery and oppression “laid the base and framework for the racism which has become institutionalized in white American society”; as such, he insists that “our analysis of U.S. and international capitalism begins in race.”⁵ If the logic of racism has become institutionalized on a subconscious level, even the most radical transformations in the status of blacks will always have to be understood as provisional and contingent at best. From Carmichael’s point of view, “Black Power” is not only a revolutionary slogan meant to empower minority populations by arguing for active revolt against the system, but a warning that white America can and will do everything in its power to undercut whatever gains minority populations attempt to make. This means that material forms of progress will always and only be contingent gains, given current social arrangements rather than enduring utopian ones. As such, the struggle will in all likelihood need to continue indefinitely. “Progress” in this sense would not describe the achievement of anything like a post-racist utopia of pure social equality and opportunity but a far more restricted (and yet no less necessary) material difference in the arrangement of rights and opportunities within the prevailing social system — an always tenuous transformation in social relations and the conditions of existence for black Americans. This overwhelming sense of the radical provisionality of the movement and its goals can be seen as both the blessing and the curse of the Black Power movement and its related phenomena. Unlike other movements, it is capable of identifying possibilities for revolutionary action, but acknowledges at the

same time the likely consequences of the exercise of those possibilities as well. This is the operative context within which Frederick Douglass comes to occupy a central position in Carmichael’s thought, not only in terms of his status as an exemplary figure in African American intellectual history (which we might expect as part of a project of black nationalist historiography), but more immediately in terms of Douglass’s profound understanding of the radical provisionality of the entire project of liberation itself. As Carmichael noted,

Frederick Douglas [*sic*], the great black leader of the 1800s, said that when a slave stops obeying a master, then and only then does he seek his liberation. Camus said the same thing 100 years later on the first page of *The Rebel*, when he said that when a slave stops accepting definitions imposed upon him by his master, then and only then does he begin to move and create a life for himself. That’s very important, because what the people of the Third World are going to have to do today is to stop accepting the definitions imposed on them by the West.⁶

This is not simply a philosophical stance or a polite expression of the necessity of one’s movement into autonomy and freedom. For Carmichael, the power relations inherent in the condition of slavery in fact depend on a systematic use of violence and the exercise of force as the primary method of perpetuating the slave economy and maintaining its delicate power relationships between slaves and masters. To stop obeying, as Douglass insists, is therefore to initiate something far more dramatic than a merely rhetorical act. Such a method of seeking one’s liberation immediately summons the threat of violence as the only likely response to the slave’s decision to attempt to disrupt (even if only for a moment) the delicate balance of racialized power. While Carmichael’s turn to Douglass invokes “a refusal of definitions” as the definitive act, what is implicit here is that doing so introduces yet again the specter of violence to the master-slave relationship, this time through the force required to defend one’s refusal, and with it, in turn, the renewed show of force from those who aim to keep the slave in the subservient place they would like him to occupy without question.⁷ Douglass’s rhetorical act thus carries in its wake the return to violence, without any guarantees as to who, in the end, will come away from that refusal with his hard-won liberation and who will be struck down.

Carmichael understands these stakes. He recognizes that the way out from under the yoke of slavery (or, in 1967, the way out from systematic oppression and racism) requires just such a dangerous commitment. This is

why he is able to find in Douglass not merely a historical model but what he identifies as a “new language” for protest in society. If persistent and pervasive racism, discrimination, and oppression are not new, what is new in the Black Power movement is the degree to which nationalist militancy and the openness to the employment of violence informed this renewed call for equality, dignity, and freedom. As Carmichael, developing his position in opposition to other civil rights spokesmen of the period, says, “Rather we suggest a more meaningful language — that of Frederick Douglas [*sic*], a great black man who understood the nature of protest in society.” Carmichael quotes at length Douglass’s famous speech in which he argued that “power concedes nothing without demands.”⁸ For Carmichael, Douglass’s forceful and eloquent argument (originally delivered as part of an 1857 speech on the emancipation of the West Indies)⁹ perfectly encapsulates not only the condition of slavery in the centuries leading up to its eventual abolition in the nineteenth century but also the contemporary situation of oppressed minorities in the era of the New Left. The desire that undergirds the Black Power movement can therefore find much in Douglass that is useful to understanding the historical condition of chattel slavery and the conditions of race relations alike: the figure of Douglass now better understood as radical political contemporary, rather than distant ideological forefather.

Douglass understood from bitter experience that the social position of the slave — even the “freed” slave — is inherently tenuous and provisional. This is the link that helps us understand why Douglass as a rhetorical figure mattered so much in 1967: namely, because the radical provisionality of racial uplift, generations later, would be as pressing an issue in the 1960s as it was in Douglass’s time. Though slavery had long since been abolished, the larger institutional forms of racism, the restrictions on social, economic, legal, and political opportunity, and the ever-present dangers of latent forms of racism still persisted. The black man was still being subjected to the hateful power of the white gaze, his gains still insufficient to bring about a wholesale transformation in race relations that would render those gains permanent and unassailable.

It should be noted that Carmichael and others in the Black Power movement had often dismissed the work of Herbert Marcuse and others for its “Europeanness” and its theoretical, bourgeois intellectualism. But given the vicious closed loop that characterized the situation for black Americans in 1967, it should not surprise us to discover that Marcuse, like Carmichael, also believes that in the face of such an oppressive social totality, there is indeed a place for violence in the revolt against the system. The refusal to take violence completely off the table as a political strategy gives us just one

part of the answer to why Douglass serves as such a particularly attractive model for revolutionary action for the black nationalist and the utopian socialist alike.

First impressions would suggest that Marcuse’s intellectual and political project was radically different from Carmichael’s. In his contribution to the Dialectics of Liberation conference, “Liberation from the Affluent Society,”¹⁰ as well as in many of his most important theoretical works, Marcuse would envision some form of socialist utopia as a possibility or, rather, as a *necessity*, given that the ultimate horizon of the forms of liberation he champions is the full liberation of humankind: now master rather than servant of technology, systems of oppression, and false consciousness. As he argues,

If today these integral features, these truly radical features which make a socialist society a definite negation of the existing societies, if this qualitative difference today appears as Utopian, as idealistic, as metaphysical, this is precisely the form in which these radical features must appear if they are really to be a definite negation of the established society: if socialism is indeed the rupture of history, the radical break, the leap into the realm of freedom — a total rupture.¹¹

But if the liberation Marcuse imagines is ostensibly universal, the affluence that serves as one of the chief obstacles to that liberation certainly is not. If “Liberation from the Affluent Society” is the goal for Marcuse, Carmichael’s speech could be renamed “Liberation from the White Society,” inasmuch as the very affluence that Marcuse speaks of — particularly the affluence evident among a certain segment of society in the United States — is clearly racialized and has been from the moment the colonies imported their first shipment of African slaves to drive the engines of colonial expansion. When Marcuse implies that it is not liberation from naked violence, oppression, and discrimination that is at issue so much as liberation from a society that develops, for the most part, the material and cultural needs of its people — “a society which ... delivers the goods to an ever larger part of the population” — he may be in danger of radically oversimplifying the racially divided society that serves as Carmichael’s primary source of anger and inspiration.¹²

Furthermore, accepting and acting on Marcuse’s notion of liberation first requires one to see past or underneath socially prescribed forms of affluence and “happiness,” and as such this element of his ideas presents a special challenge to those who would seek potentially revolutionary transformations. This is one of the primary obstacles his theory faces: convincing a “happy” and relatively well-off population that it needs to refuse its submission to the

dictates of technological rationality (whereas for Carmichael and the proponents of black radicalism generally, what is most difficult about beginning the transformation of the system is precisely *not* seeing racism, segregation, and oppression everywhere). Where Marcuse must somehow convince an affluent and happily adjusted populace to refuse its “freedom in servitude,” Carmichael has no such burden: the oppression of racial minorities in the United States and throughout the world, rather than being concealed, is absolutely everywhere.

As Carmichael’s *Black Power* fleshes out the central ideas in his conference speech, so too does Marcuse’s *An Essay on Liberation* expand on his ideas from the conference in 1967. And it is here that other substantive points of connection between the two thinkers become clearer. Marcuse develops a more systematic theory of the potential revolutionary power of the black radical movements and their relationship to the prevailing socioeconomic order from which they spring. As he argues, aside from the deep class divisions within black life and its “marginal social function,” the majority of the black population “does not occupy a decisive position in the process of production,” and as a result, he concludes, “in the cynical terms of the system, a large part of this population is *expendable*.” The correspondences with Carmichael here are unmistakable and striking. Because the black population has been kept out of the systems of production and control, Marcuse adds, they can thus more easily be seen (by the very people and institutions that exclude and disempower them!) as making no essential contribution to the productivity of the system. The ultimate consequence of this tautological racial logic, he concludes, is that those in power “may not hesitate to apply extreme measures of suppression if the [black radical] movement becomes dangerous” in working to achieve some measure of the opportunities afforded to others in contemporary society.¹³

At the Dialectics of Liberation conference, Marcuse turned to the broader subjects of global forms of oppression and exploitation in an effort to articulate what is at stake in this particular formulation of the concept of liberation. Having asserted the need for a wholesale transformation of the forms of existing society at large, even those many of us would consider “progressive” or “liberatory,” he says,

Now the question we must raise is: why do we need liberation from such a society if it is capable — perhaps in the distant future, but apparently capable — of conquering poverty to a greater degree than ever before, of reducing the toil of labour and the time of labour, and of raising the standard of living? If the price for all goods delivered, the price for this comfortable servitude, for all these achievements, is

exacted from people far away from the metropolis and far away from its affluence? If the affluent society itself hardly notices what it is doing, how it is spreading terror and enslavement, how it is fighting liberation in all corners of the globe?¹⁴

For all its simple attractions, the “affluent society” — and for Marcuse, the United States serves as the paradigmatic example in this regard — is not satisfying the legitimate and most profound needs of human life. Terror, enslavement, and the perpetual battle against genuine liberation in the rush to “liberate” peoples and societies within a framework that best serves the interests of those in power, is a constitutive feature of what he calls “the syndrome of late capitalism.”¹⁵ The long histories of slavery, imperial expansion, colonialism, and the exploitive productive processes of an ever-expanding advanced industrial capitalism would thus be anathema to true freedom, despite the arguments made by their defenders in the name of progress, civilization, or the brands of “freedom” bestowed by submission to and untroubled participation in the globalized capitalist economy. Reading between the lines, we could say that, in material terms, the people “far away from the metropolis” would in this sense include black Americans as well as the oppressed populations of the Third World — the very groups Carmichael placed front and center in the emerging movements for political recognition and power.

Writing to express his solidarity with his former student, Angela Davis (who had recently been charged, but ultimately acquitted, for her alleged involvement with a kidnapping and shooting), Marcuse would reassert these sentiments in a way that brings his line of inquiry back once more into meaningful contact with those of Carmichael and the Black Power movement. As he says,

I felt uneasy when I was asked to introduce the publication of the first two lectures on Frederick Douglass which you delivered at UCLA in October 1969. ... [T]hey deal with a world to which I am still an outsider — can I say anything about it in an authentic manner? And lastly, you were my student in philosophy, and I taught philosophy; your thesis was to be on a problem in Kant: what does your life for the liberation of the black people, what does your present plight have to do with the philosophy of German Idealism?¹⁶

For some black nationalists (including, most likely, Carmichael himself), the immediate answer to Marcuse’s question might be: *nothing*. Or rather, there might not appear to be anything in the German philosophical tradition that

expressly speaks to the real situation of racist violence and institutional oppression on the ground in 1960s America, where churches were being bombed, public spaces were segregated, and lynchings and murders of blacks continued unabated. But Marcuse has framed his question as a rhetorical one, as he immediately identifies the substantive link between the philosophical tradition central to his intellectual development and the cause of Black Power by reminding Davis of her own philosophical lineage. It had been Kant, he argues, who had, years before, provided Davis with the notion that force can serve as a link between the theory and practice of freedom. The concept of liberation developed in the theoretical and activist dimensions of the lives of Douglass, Carmichael, Davis, and the broader black nationalist movement, Marcuse realizes, is very much in dialogue with the theoretical concepts of freedom at the heart of Kant, Marx, and an entire German intellectual tradition.

But Marcuse's assertions about Davis's "philosophical lineage" in fact reveals less about Davis's intellectual path than they do about Marcuse's. Looking at Davis's political and intellectual life, Marcuse is able to see more clearly than before that his own theories of liberation are indebted to concepts much more similar to those of black nationalist ideology than he at first might have believed. He contrasts these beliefs with Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of liberation, in which, regardless of the material circumstances or actual suffering, violence, and oppression involved, an inviolable space always remains preserved for the individual's inalienable freedom to refuse psychological submission. But for Marcuse, this "choice" between slavery and death or imprisonment — and for Marcuse, that is precisely what Sartre's concept leads us toward — is not a truly free choice. In fact, he insists that such a notion of liberation makes a mockery of human freedom.¹⁷ In its place, Marcuse recognizes the centrality of Douglass to his own understanding of the true stakes of genuine liberation. Not some moment of philosophical clarity or intellectual profundity, but the moment the slave fights back, the moment he actively resists his oppression — *this* is the moment when liberation truly begins. As he notes,

Frederick Douglass one day hits back. He fights the slave-breaker with all his force, and the slave-breaker does not hit back, he stands trembling; he calls other slaves to help, and they refuse. The abstract philosophical concept of a freedom which can never be taken away suddenly comes to life and reveals its very concrete truth: freedom is not only the goal of liberation, it *begins* with liberation; it is there to be practiced. This, I confess, I learned from you! Strange? I don't think so.¹⁸

For Marcuse, Davis's lectures on Douglass accomplish something profound. Enlightening as it is, the centrality of the "philosophical idea" to the intellectual tradition Marcuse so admired has now revealed its limit when set alongside the figure of Douglass. Unless the idea was a lie, Marcuse recognizes, it "must be translated into reality," compelling one to leave the campus and the classroom and help "the others, your own people to whom you still belong" (50). This is what Davis had done, and what Douglass long before her had done, by bringing the idea of liberation into a form of action — translating into reality the liberatory demand of all who are enslaved. "In this sense," Marcuse concludes, hailing the student who has gone on to wed theory to action so forcefully, "your cause is our cause."¹⁹ In short, Marcuse suggests that the cause of Black Power and its abolitionist antecedents should not be disaggregated from the philosophical project of German idealism and its relationship to emerging movements within the New Left. In this respect, as in many others, Marcuse establishes his radical difference from many of his Frankfurt School compatriots, most of whom would, by 1967, look askance at the emerging political movements — not just Black Power but also certain elements of the student, anti-war, anti-colonial, and countercultural movements with which Marcuse sympathized, seeing them as a perversion of more properly socialist or Marxist form of ideology critique.²⁰ For Marcuse, then, his admiration for Douglass (and, by extension, his sympathies with the broader political program of black nationalism) is in part an earnest response to the seductive power of the revolutionary act itself, exemplified for him in Douglass's revolutionary gesture and in New Left political demands taking shape in the late 1960s.

But there is yet another, more properly symbolic or rhetorical, function served by the repeated turns to Douglass in these New Left discourses. From the perspective of the 1960s, as well as from our own moment, the "peculiar institution" of chattel slavery occupies a privileged space in our historical consciousness inasmuch as its vast scope and undeniable horrors come down to us as precisely the sort of horrific, widespread, oppressive social system that we committed leftists could immediately and unproblematically recognize as a pure display of evil — as the absolute antithesis of the project of human freedom and dignity. Even more so than the long histories of warfare, material deprivation, suffering, false consciousness, discrimination, the struggle between labor and capital, institutional injustices, and the colonization of the inner life of the individual in industrial society (the list could be extended indefinitely), the institution of chattel slavery presents itself to us as sufficiently distinct from our own contemporary practices and so destructive of human life that its radical difference from present-day society makes it impossible (thankfully, we might wish to add) to find

anything that even approximates its nightmarish conditions. Slavery can appear, then, to even the most anti-utopian and anti-progressivist among us as evidence that no matter what problems exist in modern life, they are surely not remotely comparable to the destructiveness and cruelty of the slave trade — much as, following Adorno, we might be inclined to let “Auschwitz” serve a symbolic or synecdochal function beyond its literal ones: it is the special case, the low-water mark of man’s unbridled inhumanity to man.

In this respect, Frederick Douglass can serve simultaneously as a revolutionary figure for the black nationalist and the German émigré alike. The undeniable power and wisdom of Douglass’s ideas aside, there is something else fundamental that compels two such distinctly different figures of the New Left to locate meaningful antecedents to their individual brands of rebellion in the same historical personage. The complicated character of key elements of the discourse of New Left theory and practice — at once beleaguered and frustrated, bold and utopian in its aims, ever seeking to find greater political traction (whether from the be-ins to the march on the Pentagon, from outbreaks of violence in the inner cities to a massive and frustrated anti-war coalition) — should remind us that what we are witnessing in this period is not just the development and mobilization of an array of radical political movements but also the simultaneous expression of anger, resentment, confusion, and despair in the face of a social system that seemed to find ever new ways to co-opt, subvert, and undermine the power and effectiveness of these movements at every turn. The universal, revolutionary act of negation — the central Marcusean imperative — has effectively been rendered impotent within the advanced capitalist order.

Given these conditions, Douglass can symbolize for a multifaceted New Left the indissoluble unity of the individual agent acting upon and against a system that must be brought down brick by brick. More so than any other historical phenomenon — whether the exploitation of wage labor, nebulous but omnipresent forms of institutionalized discrimination, systemic abuses of human rights and civil liberties, or an array of other injustices — the fact of historical chattel slavery itself casts in bold relief (quite literally, in a divide between black and white on the level of the physical and psychological organization of bodies) the much subtler and yet equally damaging forms of oppression for which the New Left was still struggling to find a sufficiently rich and striking vocabulary. Because there is nothing resembling a forceful rhetorical analogue to “the slave” in the contemporary capitalist order, “the slave” can therefore come to figure as a rhetorical trope or, more subtly, as an allegorical figure for the forms of oppression that the committed anti-capitalists, anti-imperialists, and anti-racists of the polyglot New Left are experiencing without ever quite being able to name or understand in a

sufficiently striking fashion. Even today, from a rhetorical point of view, the “rupture of history” called for by Marcuse, as well as the demand for racial equality and opportunity by any means necessary through the slogan of “Black Power” offered by Carmichael, pale in comparison to the image of the slave who dares to speak, the slave who achieves his liberation.

If this is the case, and Douglass (and the abolitionist cause that his rhetoric and his decisive act represent) is in fact performing significant figural work within Carmichael and Marcuse’s analyses, this raises another issue relevant to a fuller understanding of the complicated legacies of the New Left. For alongside this analysis of the use of “the slave” as a rhetorical figure, there should be a certain element of critical disquiet. For it would not do to document certain New Left rhetorical strategies and offer these arguments as to their putative purpose if we did not at the same time scrutinize more carefully this valorization of Douglass and the figure of the slave. What actually happens to “the slave” and the historical fact and memory of slavery in this process of figuration, resurrected as a vehicle for New Leftist self-fashioning and political identification? Even if we read Marcuse and Carmichael’s individual deployments of Douglass and the condition of slavery in the most charitable fashion — recognizing that they are speaking, perhaps, of rough analogies with contemporary situations of uneven power relations, rather than drawing strict parallels between the historical condition of the slave and those who oppose the West’s global imperium — it is still worth considering what this might say about their relationship to the historical facts of slavery. In “Hegel and Haiti,” Susan Buck-Morss offers a productive critique of Enlightenment discourses of slavery and liberation that conveniently elided the problem of actually existing slavery by conceptualizing “slavery” in largely metaphorical or allegorical (rather than material and historical) terms.²¹ For Buck-Morss, Locke’s criticism of “slavery,” for example, has nothing to do with the real conditions of enslaved Africans but becomes instead “a metaphor for legal tyranny,”²² much as Hegel ignored or suppressed consideration of actually existing slavery to craft his dialectic of lordship and bondage in order to develop a definition of “slavery” as a more broadly philosophical obstacle to the free and full development of individual sensibility. This tendency to speak of “slavery” while ignoring real-world slavery itself, she adds, is likewise evident in later Marxist appropriations of Hegel’s dialectic. As she argues, beginning with Marx and continuing through Lukacs, Kojève, and others (including, notably, Herbert Marcuse), “the struggle between the master and the slave has been abstracted from literal reference and read once again as a metaphor — this time for class struggle.”²³ These are strong criticisms, and Buck-Morss’s palpable frustration with received histories of

Hegel invites us to reexamine certain fundamental elements of the social construction of Enlightenment philosophy, as well as of a broader Hegelian-Marxist tradition that has often fallen prey to reconstituting as class dramas certain social antagonisms that cannot be understood apart from the racial dynamics that inform them in powerful ways.

But I want to close by suggesting something else about the potential dangers of transforming historical crises to tropes and figures for understanding contemporary crises. It would be easy to fault Marcuse and Carmichael for their recourse to the ideological shorthand of slavery or the totemic figure of Douglass. But what we are confronted with in our present moment, four decades after the *Dialectics of Liberation* conference and now exactly four decades since the flashpoint of “1968,” is the possibility of repeating that very gesture, only now with the New Left or “1968” on the receiving end of this form of figuration. What remains to be reckoned with right now is the allure and attraction of the familiar totemic images of the New Left and the specter of 1968. From our present moment of apathy and crisis, the evidence suggests that we are being seduced into the same kinds of dangerous transferences that beset the figures of the New Left themselves. Like Frederick Douglass and the figure of the slave in decades past, “1968” and its satellite figures now seem to tempt many of us to the same kinds of figuration and synecdoche. While commemoration is important, we could be seeing in this new century the first signs of a dangerous form of intellectual ossification, reducing the New Left and its multifaceted legacy to manageable parameters for easier hagiography, while simultaneously bearing silent witness to (or indeed actively taking part in) the inward or reflective turn that claims to be made in service of the present moment but can in fact serve as a distraction from it. Is the New Left and the spirit of 1968 part of a new and damaging metaphor, a new destructive figure of nostalgia? We need to be thinking much more about this question, as well as the consequences of not confronting it with sufficient rigor and commitment.

When the conveners of the *Dialectics of Liberation* conference planned their event, they were driven to do so by an array of contemporary crises. Millions of people worldwide were suffering and dying because they were unable to meet their basic material needs; the decimation and commodification of the environment was proceeding with increasing haste in the relentless drive for the globalization of industry and consumption; anti-colonial efforts were being met with the full force of state violence. And, of course, the United States was engaged in an extremely unpopular and unwinnable imperialist war. If this sounds at all familiar to those of living in 2008, it may serve us well to resist the impulse to draw parallels, since points

of connection, when not read critically, can all too often turn us toward reflection rather than revolution.

Notes

¹ Selections from the conference were subsequently published as *The Dialectics of Liberation* (1968), edited by David Cooper. The opening quotation is taken from this volume’s jacket copy.

² For a full account of this aspect of his theory of liberation see Marcuse’s *Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965).

³ Stokely Carmichael and Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)*, (New York: Scribner, 2002) 160, 165.

⁴ Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage, 1967) 149.

⁵ Carmichael, “Black Power” 163-164.

⁶ Carmichael, “Black Power” 153.

⁷ “Refusal,” we should remember, is perhaps the single most crucial keyword, and the single most important psychological and political concept, in Marcuse’s oeuvre.

⁸ Carmichael, “Black Power” 171–72. This passion for the figure of Douglass extended well beyond Carmichael’s presentation at the conference. To give some sense of its importance to Carmichael, it’s worth noting that this same quote from Douglass, and Carmichael’s similar framing of it in terms that separate his arguments from those of gradualists and advocates of other civil rights positions, is reproduced verbatim in the book-length version of his argument as well. See Carmichael, *Black Power* x.

⁹ See Frederick Douglass, “The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies” (1857), reprinted in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, ed. John W. Blassingame (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985) 183-208.

¹⁰ Herbert Marcuse, “Liberation from the Affluent Society,” *The Dialectics of Liberation*, ed. David Cooper (Baltimore: Penguin, 1968) 175–92.

¹¹ Marcuse, “Affluent Society” 177.

¹² For a much more nuanced account of the relationship of racial minorities to the “affluent society” he describes, see Marcuse, “The Problem of Violence and the Radical Opposition,” *The New Left and the 1960s*, ed. Douglas Kellner (London: Routledge, 2005) 57–75. Unlike his speech at the *Dialectics of Liberation* conference, this text — originally presented as a lecture at the Free University of Berlin that same summer — engages more fully with the problem of race and its relationship to the uneven status of the very “affluent society” Marcuse hopes to dismantle. Had Marcuse presented this material at the London conference instead, it is possible that Carmichael may not have been quite as dismissive of the “heavily

‘theoretical’” intellectuals and academics who made up the majority of speakers at the Congress. For Carmichael’s largely skeptical impressions of the conference as a whole, see chapter 24 of Stokely Carmichael and Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Scribner, 2002). Marcuse’s most succinct and accurate account of this relationship is found in “Art and Liberation,” first published in *Partisan Review* in 1972.

But what holds true for the notion of revolutionary art with respect to the working classes in the advanced capitalist countries *does not apply* to the situation of the racial minorities in these countries, and the majorities in the Third World. . . . What is at stake in the situation of the oppressed minority is the most general of all needs: the very existence of the individual and his group as human beings.

See Marcuse, “Art and Liberation,” *Art and Liberation*, ed. Douglas Kellner, (London: Routledge, 2007) 177.

¹³ Marcuse, “Violence” 58.

¹⁴ Marcuse, “Affluent Society” 181.

¹⁵ Marcuse, “Affluent Society” 180.

¹⁶ Herbert Marcuse, “Dear Angela,” *The New Left and the 1960s*, ed. Douglas Kellner (London: Routledge, 2005) 49.

¹⁷ Sartre, of course, will modify this view in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism* (London: Verso, 2008).

¹⁸ Marcuse, “Dear Angela” 49.

¹⁹ Marcuse, “Dear Angela” 50. I would like to thank Corey Capers for highlighting the importance of this dialogue between Marcuse and Davis as being one that works both ways: not merely with Marcuse as teacher but now, in the wake of Davis’s growing political activism and her intellectual development, with her role as teacher to Marcuse.

²⁰ See, for example, Marcuse’s exchanges with Adorno, some of which were published in “Correspondence on the German Student Movement,” *New Left Review* 1:233 (Jan./Feb. 1999) 123-136.

²¹ Susan Buck-Morss, “Hegel and Haiti,” *Critical Inquiry* 26 (Summer 2000): 821–65.

²² Buck-Morss, “Hegel and Haiti” 826.

²³ Buck-Morss, “Hegel and Haiti” 850.