

**Cornel West, “The Prophetic Tradition in Afro-America,”  
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*I. Introduction*

Prophetic modes of thought and action are dotted across the landscape of Afro-American history. I understand these modes to consist of protracted and principled struggles against forms of personal despair, intellectual dogmatism and socioeconomic oppression that foster communities of hope. Therefore the distinctive features of prophetic activity are Pascalian leaps of faith in the capacity of human beings to transform their circumstances, engage in relentless criticism and self-criticism and project visions, analyses and practices of social freedom. In this essay, I shall attempt to characterize and criticize—hence try to reactivate—the prophetic tradition in Afro-America.

*II. The American Terrain*

It is impossible to characterize adequately prophetic activity among Afro-Americans without understanding the specific circumstances under which these practices occur. So it is necessary to put forward brief sketch of the specificity of American society and culture—highlighting the ideological, political and economic spheres.

The most crucial brute fact about the American terrain is that the USA began as a liberal capitalist nation permeated with patriarchal oppression and based, in large part, upon a slave economy. Born modern, born liberal and born bourgeois, the USA's relative absence of a feudal past gave way in the Northern states to an agrarian utopia of free independent farmers on "free" land. In the Southern states, the thriving economy of slavery underscored an aristocratic ethos and 1 entrepreneurial ethic. These beginnings facilitated the ideological redominance of an American-style

liberalism which, on the one hand, promoted the sanctity of private property, the virtue of capital accumulation and the subordination of women and, on the other hand, encouraged the flowering of a slave-based society principally upon the ideological pillar of the inferiority of nonEuropeans, especially Africans.

This native form of liberalism was engendered not by opposition to feudalism as in Europe but rather by securing property-owning white male consensus in order to maintain social stability. Motivated by notions of new beginnings, Edenic innocence and exemplary performance, the anti-colonial sentiments of the nation entailed an abiding distrust of institutional power, bureaucracy and, above all, the state. Despite unprecedented proliferation of voluntary associations, American political discourse placed great emphasis on the welfare of proper tied persons as atomistic individuals rather than as community dwellers or citizens of a republic.

This liberal ideology of Americanism embodied the ideals of bourgeois freedom (such as the freedom to own property, accumulate capital, speak one's mind and organize to worship) and formal equality (equal treatment under the law)—circumscribed by racist, sexist and class constraints. These ideological viewpoints indeed have undergone change over time, yet their traces strongly persist in contemporary American life. To put it crudely, most Americans even now—be they of the Right or the Left—are highly individualistic, libertarian, anti-statist as well as racist and sexist.

The ideals of bourgeois freedom and formal equality became a beacon to oppressed social classes and ethnic groups around the world. Widespread immigration to the USA contributed to the first ecumenical, multiethnic, and multiracial working class in the world and the most complex heterogeneous population in modernity. In addition, the boomtown character of American

industrialization—urban centers which appeared virtually overnight—set the context for the flourishing of nativism, jingoism, anti-Semitism and the already entrenched sexism and, above all, racism.

In the political sphere, the infamous "gift of suffrage" to the white male component of the working class without the need for organized proletarian organization—in fact prior to widespread industrialization hence substantive modern class formation—yielded deep allegiance of the white male populace to the existing political order. The political arrangement of coalitional politics and political machines within the framework of a two-party system channeled organizational efforts of class, race and gender into practical interest group struggles and thereby relegated oppositional movements to either ill-fated third parties or political oblivion. Furthermore, harsh state repression has been exercised against perceived extremists who threaten the tenuous consensus which the liberal ideology of Americanism reinforces.

This ingenious political setup encourages diverse modes of interest group articulation and permits incremental social change; it also domesticates oppositional movements, dilutes credible wholesale programs of social change and encourages sustained organizational efforts at undermining the liberal consensus. The political predicament of all prophetic practices in the USA has been and remains that of ideological purity and political irrelevance or ideological compromise and political marginality.

Extraordinary American productivity principally owing to tremendous technological innovation (motivated, in part, by labor shortages), abundant natural resources (secured by imperialist domination of indigenous and Mexican peoples) and cheap labor (usually imported from

various parts of the globe) has enabled social upward mobility unknown in the modern world. The availability of goods, luxuries and conveniences—which has made comfort an American obsession — to significant segments of the population gives the appearance of a widely fluid social structure. This perception provides credence to the Horatio Alger dimension of the liberal ideology of Americanism: the possibility of rags-to-riches success for all. Even the lower classes remain enchanted by this seductive ideological drama.

High levels of productivity, with uneven expressions across various regions of the country, have made the commitment to economic growth an unquestioned national dogma. From the far Right (for whom growth is a symptom of liberty) to the sophisticated Left (for whom growth makes easier redistribution), Americans remain captive to the notion of economic expansion. This dogma undergirds the consensus American-style liberalism and thereby views *as natural necessity* the close partnership of the state, banks and large corporations and their coordinated expansionist activities abroad—with often repressive consequences for the native populations. This partnership, along with its imperialist extension, is the linchpin of the American terrain.

### *III. On Black Prophetic Practices*

These distinctively American circumstances have produced *truncated* prophetic practices, especially among Afro-Americans. Such practices—be they populist, feminist, trade-unionist, socialist or Red, Green and Black politics—are truncated in that they are rendered relatively impotent if they fall outside the liberal consensus and irreparably innocuous if they function within this consensus. In other words, if prophetic practices radically call into question the orthodoxy of American-style liberalism they are either repudiated or repressed and if they accept the perimeters of

this orthodoxy they are effectively domesticated and absorbed by the power that be. This clever American way of dealing with prophetic critiques has produced a marvelously stable society; it also has reduced the capacity of this society to grow and develop. In fact, it can be said with confidence that American society is one of the few to move from innocence to corruption without a mediating stage of maturity. In short, American society has been and remains unable to face its systemic and structural problems.

A major problem perennially facing black prophetic practices is that only in brief historical moments have basic black concerns—such as institutional racism—gained a foothold in American public discourse. Hence, most black prophetic practices have had minimal impact on American society and culture. This is ironic in that a strong case can be made that black Americans are the most American of all Americans; that is, they not only cling most deeply to the ideals of Americanism as enunciated in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution but they also are the most hybrid of Americans in blood, colors and cultural creations.

Black prophetic practices best exemplify the truncated content and character of American prophetic practices; they reveal the strengths and shortcomings, the importance and impotence, of prophetic activities in recalcitrant America. Black prophetic practices can be generally characterized by three basic features: *a deep-seated moralism, an inescapable opportunism and an aggressive pessimism*. This deep-seated moralism flows from the pervasive influence of Protestant Christianity—unmatched among other modern industrial and postindustrial nations. Afro-American prophetic practices have been and, for the most part, remain ensconced in a moralistic mood: that is, they are grounded in a moralistic conception of the world in which the rightness or wrongness of human

actions—be they individually or collectively understood—are measured by ethical ideals or moral standards. Like the Puritans, the first European Americans, black prophetic Americans have tended to assume that such ideals and standards ought to make a difference in regard to how individuals act and how institutions operate. In short, black prophetic practices assume that—after the most intense scrutiny—some ultimate sense of a morally-grounded sense of justice ought to prevail in personal and societal affairs.

The inescapable opportunism—or the unprincipled scrambling for crumbs—of black prophetic practices is largely a function of both the unmet needs of black Americans and, more importantly, the design and operation of the American social system. The needs of black Americans are similar to those of most Americans: more control over their lives and destinies, better living conditions, health care, education and the extension of liberties for the effective exercise of their unique capacities and potentialities. The satisfaction of these needs are rooted in the quest for more democratic arrangements—in the political, economic and cultural spheres—which facilitate more self-realization.

The design and operation of the American social system requires that this quest for democracy and self-realization be channeled into unfair competitive circumstances such that opportunistic results are unavoidable. In fact, in an ironic way, opportunistic practices become requisite to sustain the very sense of prophetic sensibilities and values in the USA. This is so primarily because deliverance is the common denominator in American society and culture—and a set of practices of whatever sort cannot be sustained or legitimated over time and space without some kind of delivery-system or some way of showing that crucial consequences and effects (such as goods

and services) flow from one's project. This "delivery prerequisite" usually forces even prophetic critiques and actions to adopt opportunistic strategies and tactics in order to justify themselves to a disadvantaged and down trodden constituency.

This situation often results in a profound pessimism among prophetic black Americans regarding the possibilities of fundamental transformation of American society and culture. The odds seem so over whelming, the incorporative strategies of the status quo so effective—and the racism so deeply entrenched in American life. Yet most prophetic practices among black Americans have given this pessimism an aggressiveness such that it becomes sobering rather than disabling, a stumbling block rather than a dead-end, a challenge to meet rather than a conclusion to accept.

In the remainder of this essay, I shall try to defend my general characterization of black prophetic practices by presenting persuasive interpretations of three central sets of these practices in Afro-America: prophetic black Christian practices, prophetic black womanist practices and prophetic black socialist practices. Although I may highlight certain individuals within each set of practices, I intend to view these individuals as but embodiments of the set they best represent.

#### *IV. Prophetic Black Christian Practices*

The institutional roots of the prophetic tradition in Afro-America lie in black churches. Although never acquiring a majority of black people within their walls, black churches have had a disproportion ate amount of influence in Afro-America. These institutions were the unique products of a courageous and creative people who struggled under excruciating conditions of economic exploitation, political oppression and cultural degradation. Owing to a lower ratio of African to European Americans—as well as laboring in smaller plantations with much less absentee ownership—

than that of Latin America, black people in the USA interacted more intensely and frequently with white Americans. And with an inhumane stress on slave reproduction—as opposed to slave importation in the Caribbean and Latin America—it was more difficult for younger generations of Afro-Americans to preserve their ties to African customs and rituals. It is important to keep in mind that only 4.5% of all Africans imported to the New World—427,000 out of 9.5 million—came to North America. In stark contrast, 3.7 million Africans were imported to Brazil, 748,000 to Jamaica and 702,000 to Cuba.

The African appropriation of Euro-American Christianity was, in part, the result of the black encounter with the absurd; that is, an attempt to make sense out of a meaningless and senseless predicament. With the generational distancing from African culture—hence the waning of African traditional religions among the new progeny of slaves— Afro-Americans became more and more attracted to religious dissenters in American culture. White Methodists, and especially white Baptists, seized the imagination of many black slaves for a variety of reasons. First, black people found themselves locked into what Orlando Patterson has coined "natal alienation"; that is, the loss of ties at birth in both ascending and descending generations. Hence, a form of social death as dishonored persons with no public worth only economic value. Dissenting Protestant Christianity provided many black slaves with a sense of somebodiness, a personal and egalitarian God who gave them an identity and dignity not found in American society. It also yielded a deep sense of the tragic—not accented in West African religions-while holding out the possibility of ultimate triumph.

The Baptist polity—adopted by a majority of black Christian slaves—provided a precious historical possession not found among other groups of oppressed black people in the New World:



control over their own ecclesiastical institutions. The uncomplicated requirements for membership, open and easy access to the clerk and congregation centered mode of church governance set the cultural context for the flowering of Africanisms, invaluable fellowship and political discourse. In fact, this setting served as the crucible for not simply distinctive Afro-American cultural products but also for much of the unique American cultural contributions to the world—including the spirituals, blues and jazz.

Black churches permitted and promoted the kinetic orality of Afro-Americans—the fluid and protean power of the Word in speech and song along with the rich Africanisms such as antiphonality (call-and-response), polyrhythms, syncopation and repetition; the passionate physicality, including the bodily participation in liturgical and everyday expressions; and the combative spirituality which accents a super natural and subversive joy, an oppositional perseverance and patience. Some of these churches served as the places where slave insurrections were planned—such as those of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. And legal sanctions against black people worshiping God without white supervision were pervasive throughout the Southern USA. In short, black churches were the major public spheres in Afro-America where strategies of survival and visions of liberation, tactics of reform and dream of emancipation were put forward. Black Christian discourse became the predominant language wherein subversive desires and Utopian energies of Afro-Americans were garnered, cultivated and expressed.

Yet, as it has been noted, Afro-American Christianity did not produce a militant millennialist tradition. This does not mean that there was no prophetic tradition among Afro-American Christians; only that this prophetic tradition did not promote explicitly revolutionary

action on a broad scale. This was so for three basic reasons. First, the American status quo, and especially in the South, was too entrenched, too solid. A black Christian millennialist revolt would only result in communal or personal suicide—as evidenced in the executions of Prosser, Vesey, Turner and those who followed them. Second, the Afro-American Christian accent on the tragic sense of life and history precluded perfectionistic conceptions of the Kingdom of God on earth conceptions which often fuel millennial movements. Third, militant millennial movements usually result from the complex tension generated from a clash of two distinct ways of life in which an exemplary prophet calls for a return and recovery of pristine origins that yield ascetic sensibilities and revolutionary action. Afro-American Christian slaves—despite harsh domination—shared too much in common with Euro-American slave holders in regard to culture and civilization. Notwithstanding deep dissimilarities, these differences were not deep enough to give cultural credence and existential authenticity to claims about Afro-Americans and Euro-Americans inhabiting two distinct and different ways of life. Subsequent black nationalist movements have attempted to authenticate such claims-but usually to no avail in regard to revolutionary action. In fact, most black nationalist movements have been Zionist, as with Chief Sam and Marcus Garvey or explicitly apolitical as with Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam. Maulana Karenga's US—owing to his creative leadership and openness to criticism—is the major black nationalist organization which serves as an exception.

The inability of Afro-American Christianity to produce a millennialist tradition is a tribute to black Christians—for as great and heroic it may sound in books, it would have resulted, more than likely, in either wholesale genocide for black people or disempowering despair and overwhelming self-destruction among black people. In fact, the latter has been in process since the sixties among

young poor black people given the high, almost millennial, expectations generated by the civil rights and Black Power movements and the inadequate response of the American powers that be. In stark contrast, the Afro-American prophetic tradition has remained more pessimistic—and realistic—regarding America's will to justice and thereby preserved a more tempered disposition toward quick change. Such a disposition indeed may buttress the status quo, yet it also resists suicidal efforts to revolt prematurely against it.

Martin Luther King, Jr. is a unique figure in Afro-American Christianity in that he represents both a heroic effort to reform and a suicidal effort to revolutionize American society and culture. In the early years of his prophetic Christian leadership of the civil rights movement, King attempted to bring oppressed black southerners into the mainstream of American life. In a crypto-fascist, under-industrialized racist American South, even these efforts at minimal reform could cost one's life. Yet as King moved into the urban North, reassessed U.S. presence in the Dominican Republic, South Africa and South Vietnam, he concluded that only a fundamental transformation of American society and culture—a democratic socialist USA which promoted non-racist life-styles—could provide black freedom. This latter conclusion moved King far out of the mainstream of Afro-American Christianity and of American public discourse. Such a prophetic vision of America proved too threatening to America from one whose prophecy was not simply words, but more importantly, action. In this regard, King and his ability to mobilize people of different races and groups was far more dangerous than a library full of black liberation theology or a room full of black liberation theologians who remain distant from peoples' resistance movements. Yet King's deep moralism rooted in his black Christian convictions, his inescapable opportunism as enacted in his deal with

President Johnson to exclude Fannie Lou Hamer and the black Mississippi democrats at the Democratic National Convention (1964) in Atlantic City and his aggressive pessimism, as seen in his later depiction of American society as "sicker" than he ever imagined, bear out the predicament of black prophetic practices in the USA.

#### V. *Prophetic Black Womanist Practices*

The first national articulation of black prophetic practices in the USA rests with black women. The first nationwide protest organization among Afro-Americans was created by black women. Predating The National Urban League (1900) and The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (1909), The National Federation of Afro-American Women (1895) brought together black women across denominational, ideological and political lines. Inspired by the militant anti-lynching and womanist spokeswoman, Ida Wells-Barnett, black womens' club movements around the country came together in order to focus on two major issues: the humiliating conditions of black womens' work, especially the sexual abuse and degrading im ages of black women in domestic service (in which a majority of black women were employed) and the debilitating effects of Jim-Crowism, especially the unique American institution (literally invented here) of lynching—which victimized two black persons a week from 1885 to 1922. Furthermore, the black women accented the subtle connection between black sexuality and white violence by acknowledging the fact that lynching was justified often as a way of protecting white women against rape by black men.

Building upon the heroic action of the underground railroad revolutionary Harriet Tubman, the outspoken abolitionist Marie W. Stuart, the exemplary 19th century womanist Sojourner Truth

and the Sorbonne-educated teacher and writer Anna Cooper, the national organizations of black women raised their voices in unison against institutional racism in the country and institutional sexism in the country and the black community. In her texts, *Southern Horrors* (1892) and *A Red Record* (1895), Ida Wells-Barnett delineated, in excruciating detail, the figures and facts of Southern lynchings—including the white male and female victims—as well as put forward a broad account of why the lynchings systematically occurred—an account that acknowledged the sexual and economic motivations for lynching. And in Anna Cooper's important yet neglected book, *A Voice From the South* (1892), a sophisticated case was made linking again both racism in American society and sexism in Afro-America.

The long and winding career of Ida Wells-Barnett is illuminating for an understanding of the power and pitfalls of black prophetic practices. Beginning as editor of *Free Speech and Headlight*, a Baptist weekly in Memphis, Tennessee, Wells-Barnett is run out of town by racist whites after an article of hers presents a scathing critique of the city's silence concerning the lynching of her three close friends. She serves briefly as a columnist for T. Thomas Fortune's renowned *New York Age* and then moves to Chicago where she founds and edits (along with her militant lawyer-husband, Ferdinand Barnett) the *Chicago Conservator*. Famous for her devastating criticisms of accommodationist black clergy and her bold support of black self-defense, Wells-Barnett engages in a life-long battle with Booker T. Washington and his ubiquitous machine. Recent works on Washington have disclosed the extent to which he controlled, connived with, spied on, and manipulated the major black institutions and movements of his day. And his opposition to Wells-Barnett—principally owing to her militancy—exemplifies such behavior. For example, Washington's

wife, Margaret, not only heads the first national black women's organization, she also joins the other major leader, Mary Church Terrell, in blocking Wells-Barnett from holding high office.

Furthermore, Washington's control of the Chicago NAACP branch cuts off valuable funding for Wells-Barnett's settlement house. Even W.E.B. Du Bois curtails Wells-Barnett's presence on the national level of the NAACP—an organization she, along with Du Bois and others (mostly white liberals and socialists) founded—by excluding her from the board of directors. In short, Wells-Barnett employs a moral standard and finds the black male clergy wanting, falls victim many times to Booker T. Washington's rapacious opportunism and finds herself abandoned by the very organizations she helped found and build. Her career ends with a similar aggressive pessimism to that of Martin Luther King, Jr.—yet hers is directed not only at the "sick ness" of American society but also at the sexism of Afro-America.

This sense of aggressive pessimism can be seen in subsequent prophetic practices of black women. It is apparent in the efforts of Bonita Williams, Eloise and Audley Moore—all black women members of the Communist Party USA in the thirties—who in the midst of the least racist organization in the USA during the depression still object to its subtle racism. In their attempt to promote a ban on the rampant inter racial marriages in the Party, they are forced to ask a black male comrade from Kansas City, Abner Berry, to make the motion at the Central Committee meeting only to discover later that he is married to a white woman. Similar experiences of marginality in the labor movement can be seen in the gallant struggles of Victoria Garvin—the first black woman to hold a high elected office in American trade-unionism, i.e. Vice-President of the Distributing, Processing and Office Workers (DPOWA-CIO)—and Octavia Hawkins, the leader of UAW Local

453 in Chicago—both of whom were major figures in the National Negro Labor Council, the foremost black protest group in the early fifties which was soon crushed by McCarthyism.

In the recent black freedom struggle, the list goes on and on. From the legendary Fanny Lou Hamer of the National Welfare Rights Organization, Miranda Smith of the Tobacco Workers Union, Frances Beale of SNCC (now of Line of March), Ericka Huggins of the Black Panther Party to Angela Davis of the Communist Party, USA. Although each case is quite different, the common denominator is protracted struggle against the effects of race, class and gender oppression in the USA and those of class and gender combination in Afro-America. The contemporary writings of Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Sonia Sanchez, Lucille Clifton and Audre Lorde—though constituting both a grand literary upsurge and a dim hope for black womens' enhancement—repeat the cycle of black prophetic practices: initial moralism, inescapable opportunism and combative pessimism.

#### VI. *Black Prophetic Socialist Practices and the Future*

Black prophetic practices as manifest in black socialist thought and action, though in my view the most important set for political purposes, require less attention and scrutiny than the black prophetic Church and black womanism. This is so, in part, because socialism as a modern tradition is less indigenous to black prophetic practices than the other two. Socialism—different from African communalism or agrarian cooperativism—is pre-eminently a European discourse and practice which remains far removed from both Afro-American and American life. Unlike Euro-American Christianity and white feminism, socialism has not been seriously appropriated by black people and rearticulated within an Afro-American context and language. This does not mean that there have

been no noteworthy black socialists—yet none have had the will, vision and imagination to Afro-Americanize socialist thought and practice. Yet, recently, rudimentary efforts have been made—such as Manning Marable's *Blackwater*, Maulana Karenga's *Kawaida Theory*, my own *Prophesy Deliverance!* and Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism*.

The cultural distance from socialist thought and action have forced most black socialists to shun the very riches and resources of Afro-American culture, especially its deep moralism, combative spirituality and aggressive pessimism. The results have been mere emulations and bland imitations of Euro-American socialists, who themselves possess a weak tradition of theory and practice. It is no accident that the disproportionate number of black socialist intellectuals in the USA since WWII has yet to produce a major black socialist theorist. (I consider neither Du Bois nor Oliver Cox major theoretical thinkers.) Or that there has been but one serious black socialist leader in this century—and he, a Baptist preacher during the Debsian phase of American socialism, Rev. George Washington Woodbey.

The major challenge of the prophetic tradition in Afro-America in the last decades of this century is to both build upon the best of the black prophetic Church, promote the further flowering of black womanist practices, and indigenize socialist thought and practice in conjunction with ecological concerns. This latter endeavor consists of reinscribing and rearticulating the specific forms of class exploitation and imperialist oppression *and* the violent destruction of the biosphere, nature and potentially the planet within the context of the Afro-American past and present.

This challenge is both intellectual and practical. It is intellectual in that it requires new forms of theoretical activity from black thinkers who are in close dialogue with European, Asian,



African, Latin American and Native American intellectuals yet rooted in the best of the Afro-American intellectual past. These new forms of theoretical activity must learn from Marxism (class and imperialist oppression), populism (local peoples' empowerment), civic republicanism (decentralized democratic control), liberalism (individual liberties, due process of law, separation of church and state and checks and balances) and womanism (womens' control of their bodies and destinies) as well as ecologism (communion with rather than domination of nature) and elements of Garveyism (dignity of African peoples). Similarly, it is a practical challenge in that it must be feasible and credible to a majority of the populace; that is, it must have organizational expressions with enough support, potency and power to transform fundamentally the present order. In this regard, black prophetic practices are not simply inseparable from prophetic practices of other peoples: they also hold a crucial key to the widespread impact of prophetic practices upon prevailing retarding ones.

Therefore black prophetic practices will remain truncated—as with all other American prophetic practices—unless the struggles against forms of despair, dogmatism and oppressions are cast on a new plane—a higher moral plane, a more sophisticated and open-ended theoretical plane and a more culturally—grounded political plane. The higher moral standard must make the all-inclusive ideals of individuality and democracy the center of a prophetic vision. The more sophisticated and open-ended theoretical activity must reject unidimensional analyses and master discourses yet preserve intellectual rigor and complexity. And the more culturally-grounded political plane must be deeply rooted in the everyday lives of ordinary people—people who have the ability and capacity to change the world and govern themselves under circumstances not of their own choosing.