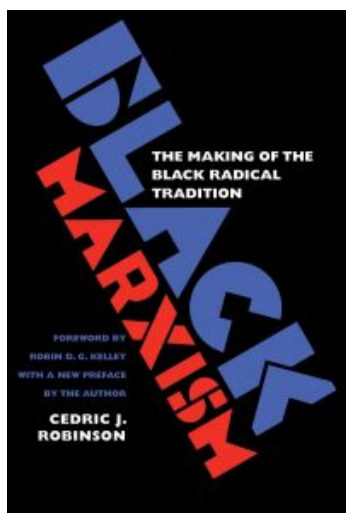


Feature Essay: Stratification Economics and the Black Radical Tradition

Property, Institutions and Social Stratification in Africa is the first book-length analysis of stratification economics in Africa, a new sub-field of economics that offers alternative political-economic explanations for inequality, not just in terms of income but also regarding group-based wealth and power. In this essay, author **Dr Franklin Obeng-Odoom** discusses his book's contribution to the field and contextualises stratification economics within the Black Radical Tradition.

Stratification Economics and the Black Radical Tradition

Stratification economics is a new sub-field of economics which provides alternative approaches for the political-economic analysis of the unequal world order in which we live. Distinctive in both ontological and methodological terms, stratification economics offers new political-economic explanations of inequality, not just in terms of income but also with respect to group-based wealth and power. It is a key field that I both draw on and contribute to in my recent book [Property, institutions and Social Stratification in Africa](#). William Darity Jr, the leading theorist of stratification economics, has provided the history of the field, its commitments and contentions in many of [his writings](#).



Another way to explain stratification economics is by contextualising it within the Black Radical Tradition. Cedric J. Robinson's book, [Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition](#) (1983), is a useful starting point. Divided into three themed parts, the book starts appropriately with 'the emergence and limitations of European Radicalism'. Next, it considers 'the roots of Black Radicalism', before going on to discuss 'Black Radicalism and Marxist Theory'. Some of the chapters in this last part are arranged to focus on black intellectuals, avoiding the problem of discussing the Black Radical Tradition without carefully engaging black scholars.

Robinson's book is magisterial. Consider Chapter Nine on W.E.B Du Bois. Not only does this chapter show that Du Bois was once idealist before becoming a materialist, a radical black scholar and activist, but it also demonstrates how Du Bois exposed the limitations of Western political economy. Neglecting or working against the systematic study of race questions was one of Du Bois's concerns with the West, the left and Western Left political economists in his time.

Even if Western political economists were supportive of the need to study race and class together, Du Bois was concerned that their key concepts were inadequate. He discussed 'labour' or 'workers' in Western Marxism, for example, arguing that neither concept fully reflects the conditions of black people in capitalist economic systems nor comprehensively appreciates the contribution of black slaves, labourers or workers to pre-capitalist political-economic organisation and change. Third, in terms of revolutions, Du Bois was also convinced that Western Marxist theories tend to overlook the complexities and peculiarities of black experiences or, if they consider such experiences at all, tend to devalue them. That said, a broad critique of idealism, as can be found in Western Marxism, is useful. Indeed, Robinson himself clearly shows the need to critique the idealism of both black and white intellectuals, while being broadly supportive of black radicals such as C.L.R James, whose work he discusses in Chapter Ten.



In
Chapter
Ten,

Robinson offers a further clarification of what the Black Radical Tradition entails, including a critique of capitalism and chattel slavery, a critique of racists and racism, a critique of Western Marxism and a development of an eclectic third alternative characterised by Pan-African liberation struggles. In the hands of Robinson, James taught me the importance of contradictions. According to Robinson, many black scholars found themselves ‘trapped’ in the British empire without many possibilities of going back home, as the British authorities wanted to contain any spread of radical ideas in the colonies. Yet, black radicals developed their work right in the metropolitan context where they had the opportunity to work with one another, the opportunity to learn together and the opportunity to observe at close range inconsistencies in the claims by the British, while seizing the opportunity to lay bare the contradictions at the heart of the empire. Consequently, they were led in their adversity to reject British, but also other forms of, imperialism. They questioned progressive Western political economy, too, because it struggled to fully reflect the concerns of the black leaders at the time. Even worse, some Western political economists sometimes wavered in their support of the oppressed.

For me, the lesson in these analyses is that we cannot lose hope as political economists, as black political economists. Even in unexpected circumstances and hostile contexts, it may be possible to find oases in deserts, and rays of light and warmth in dark and cold places. Probably the logical analytical conclusion is that, just as the strategies of slavery, colonialism and imperialism that were used to control the oppressed can be used against the oppressor, the principles of spatial, temporal and social analyses found in Marxism can also be used to problematise and reconstruct Marxism. Robinson discusses theories of revolution as one concrete example of an area where the Black Radical Tradition matters. Indeed, he argues that black writers have developed theories of revolution that are qualitatively and substantially different from theories of revolution found in Western Marxism. Robinson mentions *The Black Jacobins* by James as one such corpus of alternative theories of revolution. Perhaps, as suggested in [this discussion of Kehinde Andrews’s *Back to Black: Black Radicalism for the 21st Century*](#), the lives and contrasting theorisations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X also offer a counterpunch to Western secular theories of revolution.

A masterpiece, *Black Marxism* could have been much clearer in some of its exposition, much wider in its discussion of the sources of inspiration for black radicals and much more inclusive of the work of black feminists. Doing so would have widened the book’s analytical power and appeal. However, such notes should not take attention away from Robinson’s lasting contribution to understanding the nature of that Black Radical Tradition, typified by its challenge to orthodoxy, critique of progressivism and development of a third alternative that is truly liberatory.



That tradition can be found in the work of bell hooks, Ama Ata Aidoo, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Amina Mama, Nawal El Saadawi and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, to name but a few. Consider hooks's work in [Ain't I a Woman](#) (1981) or her book on teaching, [Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom](#) (1994), and Stella Dadzie's [A Kick in the Belly](#) (2020). In all these works, the Black Radical Tradition challenges mainstream analysis, but it also questions progressive white feminist interventions (see, for example, 'Holding My Sister's Hand', Chapter Seven of *Teaching to Transgress*). These theorists have developed a third position of their own: black feminism. That is what bell hooks means when she writes:

Commitment to feminist politics and black liberation struggle means that I must be able to confront issues of race and gender in a black context, providing meaningful answers to problematic questions as well as appropriate accessible ways to communicate them (112).

Historically, the attitude of both mainstream and progressive scholars to the Black Radical Tradition is that it is nothing new, that it does not exist, or if it exists, that it creates distraction or destruction. To the extent that it is valuable, it is merely a poor and deficient imitation of the work of what hooks calls "great" white men' (*Teaching to Transgress*, 32). In the context of Robinson's attempt to show the nature of *Black Marxism*, those 'great white men' would include Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

Yet, there truly *is* a Black Radical Tradition, sometimes called 'African political economy' or 'black political economy' – even if there are ongoing criticisms within this body of work, too, such that black radicals critique the work of one another. Marx is commonly referenced, as in Walter Rodney's work, [How Europe Underdeveloped Africa](#), but these leaders have often found Marx alone insufficient, as Andrews's [Back to Black](#), [reviewed](#) on *LSE Review of Books*, also shows. So, while this tradition is not necessarily a rejection of Western Marxism, many have been critical of Marx without necessarily denying everything Marx has to offer.

As the analyses of Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon show, this Black Radical Tradition is not anti-Marx, but there are also many other influences. Institutionalism is one of them, so the Black Radical Tradition is sometimes considered '[critical institutionalism](#)'. Personally, I have drawn from both Marx and the institutionalists, but also from Henry George, and many other theorists. There are also subtle and important differences of emphasis. For example, hooks explains in [Teaching to Transgress](#) that, even within black feminism, contributory currents are diverse. Literary criticism is one, but there are others in law, women's studies and English literature. Yet what separates these points of entry and analyses are trivial compared to what unites them: that spirit [Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana](#) called 'total liberation' of black people and all people of colour in the world.

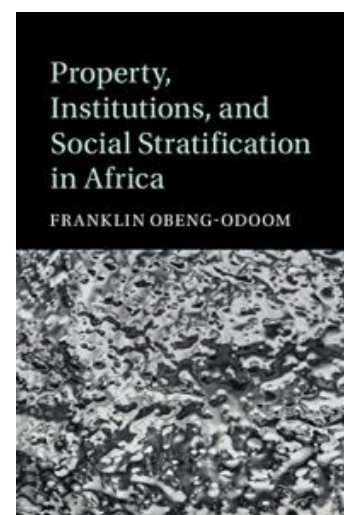
Stratification economics can be understood within this context. Its specific arrowhead and intellectual oxygen is William Darity Jr, his students and his colleagues within the National Economic Association founded in 1969 as the Caucus of Black Economists. As shown in some of their [joint work](#), the immediate concerns of stratification economics are group-based inequalities, especially the (political) economics of inter-group structural wealth disparities. Yet, no serious stratification economics can lose the spirit of the Black Radical Tradition, nor black feminism, nor African political economy, nor black political economy in general.

It has been a long-standing concern that, while literary scholars, historians, legal scholars, geographers, political scientists and others have made monumental contributions to this Black Radical Tradition, black economists have had relatively little input. This concern applies to Black Studies, African Studies and Postcolonial Studies more generally. Stratification economics can be seen as a formidable response by black economists – that is, those who self-identify as economists, those who use economic methodologies and those educated in and/or those employed by economics departments that usually teach, research and disseminate economic analyses to dominant economic orthodoxies and Western political economy alike. Still, transdisciplinary economics and (political) economic analyses are the central organising themes. Outlets such as [The Review of Black Political Economy](#), [The Cambridge Studies in Stratification Economics](#) book series and, increasingly, [The African Review of Economics and Finance](#) publish work in this tradition.

Alongside a recent essay in the [Review of African Political Economy](#) and my editorial for the [African Review of Economics and Finance](#), my substantive contribution to stratification economics is my book, [Property, Institutions, and Social Stratification in Africa](#), which appeared in Darity's book series, [The Cambridge Studies in Stratification Economics](#). The book has been [reviewed on this platform](#) and other outlets, including the [African Review of Economics and Finance](#) and [Land and Liberty](#). Yet, curiously, stratification economics and where it sits within black political economy have not been a focus of any of the published reviews of my book so far.

My book seeks to engage, but ultimately transcend, both orthodox and political-economic attempts to explain and help resolve inequality in Africa. In terms of its contribution to the relatively new field of stratification economics itself, the book strongly emphasises a distinctive theory of land economics, though a focus on land and collective living and land organisation is quite common in the Black Radical Tradition, too. Although primarily focused on the US, this emphasis is evident in [From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century](#), Darity's latest book, co-authored with A. Kirsten Mullen, in which he discusses the principle of forty acres and a mule promised to freed black slaves in the US. There are important intersections (to use Crenshaw's concept, and a central concept in black feminism and the Black Radical Tradition generally) between the oppression of African Americans, Africans on continental Africa and elsewhere, as well as [those – whether religious or secular – socially constructed as 'black'](#). #BlackLivesMatter is clearly a global movement.

[Property, Institutions, and Social Stratification in Africa](#) is the first book-length analysis of stratification economics in Africa. So, the book's contribution to the new sub-field of stratification economics is clearly distinctive in that respect. Working on the book with Professor Darity, the leading scholar on stratification economics, was both humbling and transformational. The experience has deepened my further engagement with the Black Radical Tradition. It has much to contribute in terms of the global socio-ecological crises often discussed under the rubric of climate change. My forthcoming book, [The Commons in an Age of Uncertainty: Decolonizing Nature, Economy, and Society](#), demonstrates that tradition in action. I am also currently completing a book on global migration for Oxford University Press in which I put this tradition once again to the service of humanity. Thus, to all three great problems of the world – inequality, climate change and global migration crises – stratification economics and the Black Radical Tradition have much to offer.



Note: This feature essay gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

Author Acknowledgements: I gratefully acknowledge Dr. Deller's excellent feedback. The article, however, reflects my own analysis.

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