

The Prison Slave as Hegemony's (Silent) Scandal

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The Black experience in this country has been a phenomenon without analog. — Eugene Genovese (Boston Review, October/November 1993)

THERE IS SOMETHING ORGANIC TO BLACK POSITIONALITY THAT MAKES IT ESSENTIAL to the destruction of civil society. There is nothing willful or speculative in this statement, for one could just as well state the claim the other way around: There is something organic to civil society that makes *it* essential to the destruction of the Black body. Blackness is a positionality of “absolute dereliction” (Fanon), abandonment, in the face of civil society, and therefore cannot establish itself, or be established, through hegemonic interventions. Blackness cannot become one of civil society’s many junior partners: Black citizenship, or Black civic obligation, are oxymorons.

In light of this, coalitions and social movements, even radical social movements like the Prison Abolition Movement, bound up in the solicitation of hegemony, so as to fortify and extend the interlocutory life of civil society, ultimately accommodate only the satiable demands and finite antagonisms of civil society’s junior partners (i.e., immigrants, white women, and the working class), but foreclose upon the insatiable demands and endless antagonisms of the prison slave and the prison-slave-in-waiting. In short, whereas such coalitions and social movements cannot be called the outright handmaidens of white supremacy, their rhetorical structures and political desire are underwritten by a supplemental anti-Blackness.

In her autobiography, Assata Shakur’s comments vacillate between being interesting and insightful to painfully programmatic and “responsible.” The expository method of conveyance accounts for this air of responsibility. However, toward the end of the book, she accounts for coalition work by way of extended narrative as opposed to exposition. We accompany her on one of Zayd Shakur’s many Panther projects with outside groups, work “dealing with white support

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groups who were involved in raising bail for the Panther 21 members in jail” (Shakur, 1987: 224). With no more than three words, her recollection becomes matter of fact and unfiltered. She writes, “I hated it.”

At the time, i felt that anything below 110th street was another country. All my activities were centered in Harlem and i almost never left it. Doing defense committee work was definitely not up my alley.... i hated standing around while all these white people asked me to explain myself, my existence. i became a master of the one-liner (Shakur, 1987: 224).

Her hatred of this work is bound up in her anticipation, fully realized, of all the zonal violations to come when a white woman asks her if Zayd is her “panther...you know, is he your black cat?” and then runs her fingers through Assata’s hair to cop a kinky feel. Her narrative anticipates these violations-to-come at the level of the street, as well as at the level of the body.

Here is the moment in her life as a prison-slave-in-waiting, which is to say, a moment as an ordinary Black person, when she finds herself among “friends” — abolitionists, at least partners in purpose, and yet she feels it necessary to adopt the same muscular constriction, the same coiled anticipation, the same combative “one-liners” that she will need to adopt just one year later to steel herself against the encroachment of prison guards. The verisimilitude between Assata’s well-known police encounters, and her experiences in civil society’s most nurturing nook, the radical coalition, raises disturbing questions about political desire, Black positionality, and hegemony as a modality of struggle.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon makes two moves with respect to civil society. First, he locates its genuine manifestation in Europe — the motherland. Then, with respect to the colony, he locates it only in the zone of the settler. This second move is vital for our understanding of Black positionality in America and for understanding the, at best, limitations of radical social movements in America. For if we are to follow Fanon’s analysis, and the gestures toward this understanding in some of the work of imprisoned intellectuals, then we have to come to grips with the fact that, for Black people, civil society *itself* — rather than its abuses or shortcomings — is a state of emergency.

For Fanon, civil society is predicated on the Manicheism of divided zones, opposed to each other “but not in service of a higher unity” (Fanon, 1968: 38–39). This is the basis of his later assertion that the two zones produce two different “species,” between which “no conciliation is possible” (*Ibid.*). The phrase “not in service of a higher unity” dismisses any kind of dialectical optimism for a future synthesis.

In “The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy,” Martinot and Sexton assert the primacy of Fanon’s Manichean zones (without the promise of higher unity), even in the face of American integration facticity. Fanon’s specific colonial context does not share Martinot and Sexton’s historical or national context. Common to

both texts, however, is the settler/native dynamic, the differential zoning, and the gratuity (as opposed to the contingency) of violence that accrues to the blackened position.

The dichotomy between white ethics [the discourse of civil society] and its irrelevance to the violence of police profiling is not dialectical; the two are incommensurable whenever one attempts to *speak* about the paradigm of policing, one is forced back into a discussion of particular events — high-profile homicides and their related courtroom battles, for instance (Martinot and Sexton, 2002: 6; emphasis added).

It makes no difference that in the U.S. the “casbah” and the “European” zone are laid one on top of the other. What is being asserted here is an isomorphic schematic relation — the schematic interchangeability — between Fanon’s settler society and Martinot and Sexton’s policing paradigm. For Fanon, it is the policeman and soldier (not the discursive, or hegemonic, agents) of colonialism that make one town white and the other Black. For Martinot and Sexton, this Manichean delirium manifests itself by way of the U.S. paradigm of policing that (re)produces, repetitively, the inside/outside, the civil society/Black world, by virtue of the difference between those bodies that do not magnetize bullets and those that do. “Police impunity serves to distinguish between the racial itself and the elsewhere that mandates it...the distinction between those whose human being is put permanently in question and those for whom it goes without saying” (*Ibid.*: 8). In such a paradigm, white people are, ipso facto, deputized in the face of Black people, whether they know it (consciously) or not. Whiteness, then, and by extension civil society, cannot be solely “represented” as some monumentalized coherence of phallic signifiers, but must first be understood as a social formation of contemporaries who do not magnetize bullets. This is the essence of their construction through an *assignifying* absence; their signifying presence is manifested by the fact that they are, if only by default, deputized against those who do magnetize bullets. In short, white people are not simply “protected” by the police, they *are* — *in their very corporeality* — the police.

This ipso facto deputization of white people in the face of Black people accounts for Fanon’s materiality, and Martinot and Sexton’s Manichean delirium in America. What remains to be addressed, however, is the way in which the political contestation between civil society’s junior partners (i.e., workers, white women, and immigrants), on the one hand, and white supremacist institutionalities, on the other hand, is produced by, and reproductive of, a supplemental anti-Blackness. Put another way: How is the production and accumulation of junior partner social capital dependent upon on an anti-Black rhetorical structure and a decomposed Black body?

Any serious musing on the question of antagonistic identity formation — a formation, the mass mobilization of which can precipitate a crisis in the institu-

tions and assumptive logic that undergird the United State of America — must come to grips with the contradictions between the political demands of radical social movements, such as the large prison abolition movement, which seeks to abolish the prison-industrial complex, and the ideological structure that underwrites its political desire. I contend that the positionality of Black subjectivity is at the heart of those contradictions and that this unspoken desire is bound up with the political limitations of several naturalized and uncritically accepted categories that have their genesis mainly in the works of Antonio Gramsci, namely, work or labor, the wage, exploitation, hegemony, and civil society. I wish to theorize the symptoms of rage and resignation I hear in the words of George Jackson, when he boils reform down to a single word, “fascism,” or in Assata’s brief declaration, “i hated it,” as well as in the Manichean delirium of Fanon, Martinot, and Sexton. Today, the failure of radical social movements to embrace symptoms of all three gestures is tantamount to the reproduction of an anti-Black politics that nonetheless represents itself as being in the service of the emancipation of the Black prison slave.

By examining the strategy and structure of the Black subject’s absence in, and incommensurability with, the key categories of Gramscian theory, we come face to face with three unsettling consequences:

(1) The Black American subject imposes a radical incoherence upon the assumptive logic of Gramscian discourse and on today’s coalition politics. In other words, s/he implies a scandal.

(2) The Black subject reveals the inability of social movements grounded in Gramscian discourse to think of white supremacy (rather than capitalism) as the base and thereby calls into question their claim to elaborate a comprehensive and decisive antagonism. Stated another way, Gramscian discourse and coalition politics are indeed able to imagine the subject that transforms itself into a mass of antagonistic identity formations, formations that can precipitate a crisis in wage slavery, exploitation, and hegemony, but they are asleep at the wheel when asked to provide enabling antagonisms toward unwaged slavery, despotism, and terror.

(3) We begin to see how Marxism suffers from a kind of conceptual anxiety. There is a desire for socialism on the other side of crisis, a society that does away not with the category of worker, but with the imposition workers suffer under the approach of variable capital. In other words, the mark of its conceptual anxiety is in its desire to democratize work and thus help to keep in place and insure the coherence of Reformation and Enlightenment foundational values of productivity and progress. This scenario crowds out other postrevolutionary possibilities, i.e., idleness.

The scandal, with which the Black subject position “threatens” Gramscian and coalition discourse, is manifest in the Black subject’s incommensurability with, or disarticulation of, Gramscian categories: work, progress, production, exploitation, hegemony, and historical self-awareness. Through what strategies does the

Black subject destabilize — emerge as the unthought, and thus the scandal of — historical materialism? How does the Black subject function within the “American desiring machine” differently than the quintessential Gramscian subaltern, the worker?

Capital was kick-started by the rape of the African continent, a phenomenon that is central to neither Gramsci nor Marx. According to Barrett (2002), something about the Black body in and of itself made it the repository of the violence that was the slave trade. It would have been far easier and far more profitable to take the white underclass from along the riverbanks of England and Western Europe than to travel all the way to Africa for slaves.

The theoretical importance of emphasizing this in the early 21st century is twofold. First, capital was kick-started by approaching a particular body (a black body) with direct relations of force, not by approaching a white body with variable capital. Thus, one could say that slavery is closer to capital’s primal desire than is exploitation. It is a relation of terror as opposed to a relation of hegemony. Second, today, late capital is imposing a renaissance of this original desire, the direct relation of force, the despotism of the unwaged relation. This renaissance of slavery, i.e., the reconfiguration of the prison-industrial complex has, once again, as its structuring metaphor and primary target the Black body.

The value of reintroducing the unthought category of the slave, by way of noting the absence of the Black subject, lies in the Black subject’s potential for extending the demand placed on state/capital formations because its reintroduction into the discourse expands the intensity of the antagonism. In other words, the positionality of the slave makes a demand that is in excess of the demand made by the positionality of the worker. The worker demands that productivity be fair and democratic (Gramsci’s new hegemony, Lenin’s dictatorship of the proletariat, in a word, socialism). In contrast, the slave demands that production stop, without recourse to its ultimate democratization. Work is not an organic principle for the slave. The absence of Black subjectivity from the crux of radical discourse is symptomatic of the text’s inability to cope with the possibility that the generative subject of capitalism, the Black body of the 15th and 16th centuries, and the generative subject that resolves late capital’s over-accumulation crisis, the Black (incarcerated) body of the 20th and 21st centuries, do not reify the basic categories that structure conflict within civil society: the categories of work and exploitation.

Thus, the Black subject position in America represents an antagonism or demand that cannot be satisfied through a transfer of ownership/organization of existing rubrics. In contrast, the Gramscian subject, the worker, represents a demand that can indeed be satisfied by way of a successful war of position, which brings about the end of exploitation. The worker calls into question the legitimacy of productive practices, while the slave calls into question the legitimacy of productivity itself. Thus, the insatiability of the slave demand upon existing structures means that it cannot find its articulation within the modality of

hegemony (influence, leadership, consent). The Black body cannot give its consent because “generalized trust,” the precondition for the solicitation of consent, “equals racialized whiteness” (Barrett, 2002). Furthermore, as Orlando Patterson (1982) points out, slavery is natal alienation by way of social death, which is to say, a slave has no symbolic currency or material labor power to exchange. A slave does not enter into a transaction of value (however asymmetrical), but is subsumed by direct relations of force. As such, a slave is an articulation of a despotic irrationality, whereas the worker is an articulation of a symbolic rationality.

A metaphor comes into being through a violence that kills the thing such that the concept might live. Gramscian discourse and coalition politics come to grips with America’s structuring rationality — what it calls capitalism, or political economy — but not with its structuring irrationality, the anti-production of late capital, and the hyper-discursive violence that first kills the Black subject, so that the concept may be born. In other words, from the incoherence of Black death, America generates the coherence of white life. This is important when thinking the Gramscian paradigm and their spiritual progenitors in the world of organizing in the U.S. today, with their overvaluation of hegemony and civil society. Struggles over hegemony are seldom, if ever, asignifying. At some point, they require coherence and categories for the record, meaning they contain the seeds of anti-Blackness.

What does it mean to be positioned not as a positive term in the struggle for anti-capitalist hegemony, i.e., a worker, but to be positioned in excess of hegemony, to be a catalyst that disarticulates the rubric of hegemony, to be a scandal to its assumptive, foundational logic, to threaten civil society’s discursive integrity? In *White Writing*, J.M. Coetzee (1988) examines the literature of Europeans who encountered the South African Khoisan in the Cape between the 16th and 18th centuries. The Europeans were faced with an “anthropological scandal”: a being without (recognizable) customs, religion, medicine, dietary patterns, culinary habits, sexual mores, means of agriculture, and most significantly, without character (because, according to the literature, they did not work). Other Africans, like the Xhosa who were agriculturalists, provided European discourse with enough categories for the record, so that, through various strategies of articulation, they could be known by textual projects that accompanied the colonial project. But the Khoisan did not produce the necessary categories for the record, the play of signifiers that would allow for a sustainable semiotics.

According to Coetzee, the coherence of European discourse depends upon two structuring axes. A “Historical Axis” consists of codes distributed along the axis of temporality and events, while the “Anthropological Axis” is an axis of cultural codes. It mattered very little which codes on either axis a particular indigenous community was perceived to possess, with possession the operative word, for these codes act as a kind of mutually agreed-upon currency. What matters is that

the community has some play of difference along both axes, sufficient in number to construct taxonomies that can be investigated, identified, and named by the discourse. Without this, the discourse cannot go on. It is reinvigorated when an unknown entity presents itself, but its anxiety reaches crisis proportions when the entity remains unknown. Something unspeakable occurs. Not to possess a particular code along the Anthropological or Historical Axis is akin to lacking a gene for brown hair or green eyes on an X or Y chromosome. Lacking a Historical or Anthropological Axis is akin to the absence of the chromosome itself. The first predicament raises the notion: What kind of human? The second predicament brings into crisis the notion of the human itself.

Without the textual categories of dress, diet, medicine, crafts, physical appearance, and most important, work, the Khoisan stood in refusal of the invitation to become Anthropological Man. S/he was the void in discourse that could only be designated as idleness. Thus, the Khoisan's status within discourse was not that of an opponent or an interlocutor, but rather of an unspeakable scandal. His/her position within the discourse was one of disarticulation, for he/she did little or nothing to fortify and extend the interlocutory life of the discourse. Just as the Khoisan presented the discourse of the Cape with an anthropological scandal, so the Black subject in the Western Hemisphere, the slave, presents Marxism and American textual practice with a historical scandal.

How is our incoherence in the face of the Historical Axis germane to our experience of being "a phenomenon without analog"? A sample list of codes mapped out by an American subject's historical axis might include *rights or entitlements*; here even Native Americans provide categories for the record when one thinks of how the Iroquois constitution, for example, becomes the U.S. constitution. *Sovereignty* is also included, whether a state is one the subject left behind, or as in the case of American Indians, one taken by force and dint of broken treaties. White supremacy has made good use of the Indian subject's positionality, one that fortifies and extends the interlocutory life of America as a coherent (albeit imperial) idea because treaties are forms of articulation — discussions brokered between two groups are presumed to possess the same category of historical currency, sovereignty. The code of sovereignty can have a past and future history, if you will excuse the oxymoron, when one considers that 150 Native American tribes have applied to the Bureau of Indian Affairs for sovereign recognition so that they might qualify for funds harvested from land stolen from them.¹ *Immigration* is another code that maps the subject onto the American Historical Axis, with narratives of arrival based on collective volition and premeditated desire. Chicano subject positions can fortify and extend the interlocutory life of America as an idea because racial conflict can be articulated across the various contestations over the legitimacy of arrival, immigration. Both whites and Latinos generate data for this category.

Slavery is the great leveler of the Black subject's positionality. The Black

American subject does not generate historical categories of entitlement, sovereignty, and immigration for the record. We are “off the map” with respect to the cartography that charts civil society’s semiotics; we have a past, but not a heritage. To the data-generating demands of the Historical Axis, we present a virtual blank, much like that which the Khoisan presented to the Anthropological Axis. This places us in a structurally impossible position, one that is outside the articulations of hegemony. However, it also places hegemony in a structurally impossible position because — and this is key — our presence works back upon the grammar of hegemony and threatens it with incoherence. If every subject — even the most massacred among them, Indians — is required to have analogs within the nation’s structuring narrative, and the experience of one subject, upon whom the nation’s order of wealth was built, is without analog, then that subject’s presence destabilizes all other analogs.

Fanon (1968: 37) writes, “decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder.” If we take him at his word, then we must accept that no other body functions in the Imaginary, the Symbolic, or the Real so completely as a repository of complete disorder as the Black body. Blackness is the site of absolute dereliction at the level of the Real, for in its magnetizing of bullets the Black body functions as the map of gratuitous violence through which civil society is possible: namely, those bodies for which violence is, or can be, contingent. Blackness is the site of absolute dereliction at the level of the Symbolic, for Blackness in America generates no categories for the chromosome of history, and no data for the categories of immigration or sovereignty. It is an experience without analog — a past without a heritage. Blackness is the site of absolute dereliction at the level of the Imaginary, for “whoever says ‘rape’ says Black” (Fanon), whoever says “prison” says Black, and whoever says “AIDS” says Black (Sexton) — the “Negro is a phobogenic object” (Fanon).

Indeed, it means all those things: a phobogenic object, a past without a heritage, the map of gratuitous violence, and a program of complete disorder. Whereas this realization is, and should be, cause for alarm, it should not be cause for lament, or worse, disavowal — not at least, for a true revolutionary, or for a truly revolutionary movement such as prison abolition. If a social movement is to be neither social democratic nor Marxist, in terms of structure of political desire, then it should grasp the invitation to assume the positionality of subjects of social death. If we are to be honest with ourselves, we must admit that the “Negro” has been inviting whites, as well as civil society’s junior partners, to the dance of social death for hundreds of years, but few have wanted to learn the steps. They have been, and remain today — even in the most anti-racist movements, like the prison abolition movement — invested elsewhere. This is not to say that all oppositional political desire today is pro-white, but it is usually anti-Black, meaning it will not dance with death.

Black liberation, as a prospect, makes radicalism more dangerous to the U.S.

This is not because it raises the specter of an alternative polity (such as socialism, or community control of existing resources), but because its condition of possibility and gesture of resistance function as a negative dialectic: a politics of refusal and a refusal to affirm, a “program of complete disorder.” One must embrace its disorder, its incoherence, and allow oneself to be elaborated by it, if indeed one’s politics are to be underwritten by a desire to take down this country. If this is not the desire that underwrites one’s politics, then through what strategy of legitimation is the word “prison” being linked to the word “abolition”? What are this movement’s lines of political accountability?

There is nothing foreign, frightening, or even unpracticed about the embrace of disorder and incoherence. The desire to be embraced, and elaborated, by disorder and incoherence is not anathema in and of itself. No one, for example, has ever been known to say “gee-whiz, if only my orgasms would end a little sooner, or maybe not come at all.” Yet few so-called radicals desire to be embraced, and elaborated, by the disorder and incoherence of Blackness — and the state of political movements in the U.S. today is marked by this very Negrophobogenesis: “gee-whiz, if only Black rage could be more coherent, or maybe not come at all.” Perhaps there is something more terrifying about the joy of Black than there is in the joy of sex (unless one is talking sex with a Negro). Perhaps coalitions today prefer to remain in-orgasmic in the face of civil society — with hegemony as a handy prophylactic, just in case. If, through this stasis or paralysis they try to do the work of prison abolition, that work will fail, for it is always work *from* a position of coherence (i.e., the worker) on *behalf* of a position of incoherence of the Black subject, or prison slave. In this way, social formations on the Left remain blind to the contradictions of coalitions between workers and slaves. They remain coalitions operating within the logic of civil society and function less as revolutionary promises than as crowding out scenarios of Black antagonisms, simply feeding our frustration.

Whereas the positionality of the worker (whether a factory worker demanding a monetary wage, an immigrant, or a white woman demanding a social wage) gestures toward the reconfiguration of civil society, the positionality of the Black subject (whether a prison-slave or a prison-slave-in-waiting) gestures toward the disconfiguration of civil society. From the coherence of civil society, the Black subject beckons with the incoherence of civil war, a war that reclaims Blackness not as a positive value, but as a politically enabling site, to quote Fanon, of “absolute dereliction.” It is a “scandal” that rends civil society asunder. Civil war, then, becomes the unthought, but never forgotten, understudy of hegemony. It is a Black specter waiting in the wings, an endless antagonism that cannot be satisfied (via reform or reparation), but must nonetheless be pursued to the death.

NOTE

1. White supremacy transmogrifies codes internal to Native American culture for its own purposes. However, unlike immigrants and white women, the Native American has no purchase as a junior partner in civil society. Space does not permit us to fully discuss this here. Ward Churchill and others do explain how — unlike civil society’s junior partners — genocide of the Indian, like the enslavement of Blacks, is a precondition for the idea of America. It is a condition of possibility upon which the idea of immigration can be narrativized. No web of analogy can be spun between, on the one hand, the phenomenon of genocide and slavery and, on the other hand, the phenomenon of access to institutionality and immigration. Thus, although white supremacy appropriates Native American codes of sovereignty, it cannot solve the contradiction that, unlike civil society’s junior partners, those codes are not imbricated with immigration and access.

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