

Imagining Social Justice:  
Cornel West's Prophetic Public Intellectualism

The phenomenon that is Cornel West has proven difficult to grasp or even categorize from the outset of his career. He is a philosopher, but does not write for or in the manner of the philosophical guild. He is not a theologian, yet liberation theology is at the heart of his work and vision. West has become America's greatest religious public intellectual by practicing liberation theology as a form of philosophical and social criticism.

He came to Christian social criticism through his upbringing in an African American Christian family and church and his exposure to the Civil Rights and Black Panther movements. West's grandfather C. L. West was a Baptist minister in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where West was born in 1953. Both of his parents were raised in Louisiana; his father was a civilian air force administrator, which necessitated moving around when West was young; eventually the family settled in a segregated section of Sacramento, California. West later recalled that he was a beneficiary of California's version of Jim Crow because he did not have to deal with white people or struggle for a place in the world: "Whiteness was really not a point of reference for me because the world was all black...That was a very positive thing, because it gave me a chance to really revel in black humanity." Because he grew up relatively free of direct experiences with whites, he reflected, he was able in later life to perceive whites as human beings without being affected by negative experiences or preconceptions: "I didn't have to either deify them or demonize them...I could just view them as human beings, and I think that was quite a contribution of my own context." 1

As a youth he reveled in the preaching of Shiloh Baptist Church pastor Willie P. Cooke, admired Martin Luther King Jr., was hooked by Søren Kierkegaard's struggle

with melancholia and mortality, and came to political consciousness by listening to Black Panther meetings. From Kierkegaard he took the lifelong conviction that philosophy should be about the human experiences of living, suffering, and finding hope. From the Panthers he took the lifelong conviction that politics should combine the best available theory with concrete strategies: "They taught me the importance of political philosophy *and* strategy." 2

At the age of seventeen he graduated from John F. Kennedy High School in Sacramento and enrolled at Harvard. Aside from Kierkegaard, West's knowledge of philosophy rested on Will Durant's *Story of Philosophy* and other popular histories; philosopher Robert Nozick assured him that Harvard would expose him to more "high-powered" fare, especially in the analytic tradition. In more important ways, however, West already knew who he was and what he aimed to do: "Owing to my family, church, and the black social movements of the 1960s, I arrived at Harvard unashamed of my African, Christian, and militant decolonized outlooks." He was determined to shape his own image, not have it shaped for him by Harvard University: "I've always wanted to be myself, and, of course, that is a perennial process." At Harvard he studied philosophy under Nozick, John Rawls, Hilary Putnam, and Stanley Cavell, history under Samuel Beer, H. Stuart Hughes and Martin Kilson, and social thought under Talcott Parsons, Terry Irwin, and Preston Williams, all in addition to his major, Near Eastern languages and literature, which he undertook so he could read ancient religious texts in their original languages and also graduate in three years. 3

That made him twenty years old when he began his doctoral program in philosophy at Princeton University. West worried that Princeton philosophers would undermine his Christian faith, disabuse him of his attraction to Wittgenstein, and look down on his equally strong attraction to Frankfurt School neo-Marxism. Instead, his teachers took no interest in religion, which allowed him to keep Kierkegaard and African American mystic Howard Thurman close to his heart. His mentor, Richard Rorty, took a

pragmatic historicist turn that reinforced West's commitment to Wittgensteinian anti-foundationalism, while Sheldon Wolin encouraged him to plunge deeper into the Hegelian Marxist tradition. West started with a dissertation on English idealist T. H. Green's neo-Hegelianism, switched to one on Aristotelian aspects of Marxist thought, and settled on one that explored Marx's ethical commitments. He argued that Marx's appropriation of historical consciousness and critique of capitalism were informed by ethical values of individuality and democracy, notwithstanding his attacks on moral reason. By the mid-1970s West was already acquiring a reputation as an intellectual spellbinder. The first time that I saw him, in 1975, he had attracted a sidewalk crowd of a dozen people at Harvard Divinity School and was expounding exuberantly on the varieties of black nationalism. The crowd got larger as passersby judged, as I had, "That must be Cornel West." Two years later he began his teaching career at Union Theological Seminary, which seemed to him the perfect home for his broad intellectual and activist interests. 4

"You know, my aim was always to teach at Union Seminary," he later recalled. "Union Seminary, for me, was the real institutional site that brought together all of my interests. It was a Christian seminary, it was deeply shaped by progressive politics, Marxism, feminism, antihomophobic thought and black liberation theology." Elsewhere he put it more precisely: "I decided to teach at Union Seminary for three reasons: It was (and still is) the center of liberation theology in the country; it was one of the best places for black theological education in the country; and it allowed me to teach and read widely in philosophy, social theory, history, literary criticism and cultural thought. Union was the perfect place to become a broadly engaged cultural critic with a strong grounding in the history of philosophy and criticism." At Union he formed friendships with colleagues James Cone, James Forbes, Beverly Harrison, Tom Driver, Dorothee Sölle, and especially James Washington. Equally significant for West's intellectual trajectory were his friendships with socialists Stanley Aronowitz and Michael

Harrington, his involvement with Aronowitz's journal *Social Text*, which related leftist thought to the cultural politics of difference, and his collaboration with cultural theorists associated with the editorial collective *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture*, especially Paul Bové, William Spanos, Michael Hayes, Donald Pease, and Nancy Fraser. 5

For West it was crucial to get his bearings about the kind of socialist he was, the kind he was not, and the kinds with which he could work collaboratively. Michael Harrington's Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, formed in 1973 after the break-up of the Socialist Party, smacked too much of its anti-Communist, social democratic background to be something that West could join. In 1982, however, Harrington's organization merged with the New American Movement (NAM) to form Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). NAM, a socialist offshoot of the New Left, emphasized cultural politics, anti-anti-Communism, and radical democracy. Most of its leaders were veterans of the 1960s social movements, including Aronowitz and social critic Barbara Ehrenreich. Black studies scholar Manning Marable joined DSA, as did West, though both of them battled for years with DSA's social democratic mainstream, especially its right flank of Old Left anti-Communists. Challenging DSA to fulfill its claim to be a "multi-tendency" organization, West propounded a Gramscian, black liberationist socialism as an alternative to social democratic gradualism. For seven years he served on DSA's political committee; afterwards, following Harrington's death in 1989, West served as DSA's honorary co-chair. 6

In his telling, democratic socialism was like liberal theology, a valuable project that had outlived its usefulness. Though West always cautioned that he was not a theologian, he described Marxism in theological terms and clearly favored liberation theology. Democratic socialism was too compromised by its historic identification with middle-class electoral reformism to provide the emancipatory vision that was needed, he argued. Like liberal theology, democratic socialism was a creative project of the past

that represented, at best, a “crucial stepping-stone” to something better: a Marxist, feminist, Garveyist, ecological, and antimilitarist revolutionary vision. 7

Delineating six types of Marxism—Stalinism, Leninism, Trotskyism, Gramscianism, Social Democracy, and revolutionary Councilism—West assigned a theological analogue to each. Stalinism, a total perversion of its founding symbols, was the Ku Klux Klan of Marxism. The Leninist and Trotskyist traditions were fundamentalist, marshalling proof-texts for truncated versions of Marxist norms. West admired the left-romanticist tradition of Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, especially his emphasis on cultural forms of hegemony, but acknowledged that Gramsci was only slightly democratic. Gramsci defended freedom on strategic grounds, not principle; thus his version of socialism was still essentially Leninist. To West, that made Gramscian Marxism analogous to theological neo-orthodoxy, “an innovative revision of dogmas for dogmatic purposes.” As for European social democracy, it was too much like the Social Gospel. One could get an impressive critique of capitalism from it, but not a revolutionary praxis. Though social democracy retained the Marxist concepts of the class struggle and the dialectic of history, it sold out revolutionary consciousness, concentrating on electoral reformism and anti-Communism. Like the Social Gospel, it accommodated bourgeois modernity too deeply not to be compromised by it. 8

For West the real thing was the Councilist Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg, Anton Pannekoek, and Karl Korsch, which he viewed as analogous to liberation theology. Against the class collaborationism of Social Democracy and its anti-Communist animus, the Councilist tradition was revolutionary and pre-figural. Instead of viewing workers as wage earners, voters, and consumers, it viewed workers as collective self-determining producers that prefigured the coming Socialist order. Councilist Marxism was about workers seizing power through revolutionary organizations that already prefigured a Socialist society. Because the Councilist tradition was anti-collaborationist and internally democratic, West prized it as the authentic expression of revolutionary

Marxism: “Councilism is to Marxism what liberation theology is to Christianity: a promotion and practice of the moral core of the perspective against overwhelming odds for success.” 9

Since the point was to actually change society, however, not merely to adopt a position, the overwhelming odds were a serious problem. As theory, revolutionary councilism was an important tradition of Socialist thought. As anything else, it barely existed. The social democratic tradition that West dismissed at least had actual parties and worked in solidarity with actual trade unions; Councilism, on the other hand, represented solidarity with an imaginary movement. In two books I argued for an updated guild socialist idea of economic democracy, contending that if democratic socialism was too defeated to be worth considering, that did not speak well for the utility of revolutionary Councilism, which existed only as the fantasy of left intellectuals. 10

West spent his early years in DSA debating variations of that argument. On short-term practical grounds, he allowed, democratic socialists had a strong case; on the other hand, since that option would never build real socialism, it was a loser. Democratic socialism stood for the betrayal of revolutionary consciousness and the very idea of radical democracy. Instead of building a true alternative to capitalism it settled for electoral reformism, extending the welfare state, and denouncing communism. I replied that West’s radical democratic vision was unattainable on Councilist terms, he was wrong to identify liberation theology with a single form of Marxism, and democratic socialism was not identical with welfare state social democracy. Democratic socialism also included a guild socialist stream that was closely related, structurally and historically, to the Councilist tradition. Councilism needed democratic socialism in the same way that liberation theology needed to be informed and limited by earlier forms of Christian socialism, especially those in the guild socialist tradition. 11

To a considerable degree West moved in that direction without giving up his preferences for the Councilist revolutionaries of an earlier generation. He drew increasingly on current theories of “market socialism,” especially by Branko Horvat, Włodzimierz Brus, and Alec Nove, which acknowledged the necessity of market mechanisms and establishing mixed forms of ownership. Any feasible model of socialism had to get prices right, just as it had to abolish racial, sexual, and economic hierarchies, he argued. In the name of “wholesome Christian rejection of such hierarchies,” he advocated a mixed-model democratic socialism featuring “a socio-economic arrangement with markets, price mechanisms, and induced (not directed) labor force, a free press, formal political rights, and a constitutionally based legal order with special protections of the marginalized.” In structural terms that entailed an economy with five major sections: (1) State-owned industries of basic producer goods (electricity networks, oil and petrochemical companies, financial institutions); (2) independent, self-managed, socialized public enterprises; (3) cooperative enterprises controlling their own property; (4) small private businesses; and (5) self-employed individuals. 12

Harrington argued that the future, inevitably, would be collective; the question was whether the collectivism of the future would be democratic or authoritarian. West, joining Harrington in lecture tours for DSA, found himself adopting Harrington’s signature theme. Centralization was as inescapable in modern society as the market, he argued; the struggle was to democratize collective structures. In 1986 West put it programmatically: “The crucial question is how are various forms of centralization, hierarchy, and markets regulated – that is, to what extent can democratic mechanisms yield public accountability of limited centralization, meritorious hierarchy, and a mixture of planned, socialized, and private enterprises in the market along with indispensable democratic political institutions.” 13

Elsewhere he put it more plainly, noting that for Harrington the choice was not between the bureaucratic collectivism of command economies and the “free enterprise” competition of capitalism: “Rather, the basic choice in the future will be between a democratic, or ‘bottom-up’ socialization, and corporate, or ‘top-down,’ socialization.” The point for Harrington, and eventually for West, was to broaden the participation of citizens in the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of the social order “and thus control the conditions of their existence.” By the end of the 1980s West believed that Harrington’s focus on democratizing the process of investment was exactly right and even that his democratic socialism was inspiring, “indeed visionary.” On the other hand West still preferred revolutionary Councilism and he found Harrington ironically lacking at the cultural level. Harrington, having attained fame by describing American poverty in *The Other America*, subsequently concentrated on structural economic analysis, social theory, and political strategy. He lived too far above the everyday, grasping, vacuous, nihilistic, television-watching, sometimes violent culture of ordinary consumers to write about it. Harrington was eloquent about the structural injustices of capitalism, but he passed over its equally devastating operations on the cultural level.

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That was never true of West, who emphasized cultural criticism, writing about popular music, television, sexuality, identity politics, black culture, white supremacism, the culture of nihilism, and the cultural limitations of progressive organizations dominated by whites. West’s pamphlet for DSA, “Toward a Socialist Theory of Racism,” was a signature statement for him and the organization. Stressing the Marxist bias of most American socialist theorizing about racism, West delineated four main types. The first viewed racism as an epiphenomenon of the class struggle, subsuming racial injustice under the general rubric of working class exploitation. Eugene Debs, an icon of this approach, had a simple answer to the question of what socialism offered blacks: “Nothing, except socialism.” Debs took for granted that racism was a divide-



and-conquer ruse of the ruling class. To him, a socialist revolution was the only solution to racial injustice and all other social evils; any solution outside the labor framework was racism in reverse. West acknowledged that Debs, having fought racism bravely, was an honorable example of the color-blind strategy; nonetheless, socialist reductionism was not the answer, since it ignored the complexity of the problem. 15

The second approach, usually taken by the socialist wing of the union movement, stuck to the class exploitation thesis while acknowledging that blacks were subjected to a second dose of exploitation through workplace discrimination and exclusion. This acknowledgment of racism as “super-exploitation” marked an improvement on Debs-style color-blindness, West allowed, but it still limited the struggle against racial injustice to the workplace.

The third approach was the “Black Nation” thesis of the Garveyite movement, the American Communist Party, various Leninist organizations, and a variety of black nationalist organizations and individuals including, most recently, James Forman. Contending that blacks constituted an oppressed nation within the United States, proponents usually cited Joseph Stalin’s definition of a nation in *Marxism and the National Question* (1913): “A historically constituted, stable community of people formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.” In the case of Marcus Garvey, the Black Nation thesis fueled a powerful “back to Africa” movement. West commended the Garveyite and Communist traditions for taking the cultural dimension of the freedom struggle more seriously than other socialist approaches; in this respect, most black nationalists were “proto-Gramscians.” But as theory it was shot through with ahistorical special pleading, and as practice it was backward looking, if not reactionary. 16

The fourth socialist approach, identified chiefly with W. E. B. Du Bois and neo-Marxist Oliver Cox, arose as an alternative to the Black Nation thesis. It argued that racism was a product of class exploitation and of xenophobic attitudes not reducible to class

exploitation. For Du Bois and Cox, West explained, racism had a life of its own, depending on psychological factors and cultural practices that were not necessarily or directly caused by structural economic injustices. Du Bois and Cox had the right project, West argued; they pointed to the capitalist role in modern racism while stressing psychological and cultural aspects of the problem. The contemporary struggle against racism needed to move further in that direction, stressing that the roots of racism lay in conflicts between the civilizations of Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America before modern capitalism arose, while retaining the Marxist emphasis on class exploitation. Moreover, all four of the dominant Marxist approaches operated largely or exclusively on the macrostructural level, concentrating on the dynamics of racism within and between social institutions. But a full-orbed theory of racism also had to deal with the genealogy of racism, the ideological dimensions of racism, and microinstitutional factors. 17

In other words, the best socialist theory of racism would be Gramscian, stressing culture and ideology, while extending beyond Gramsci's particular formulations. It would assume that cultural practices of racism had a reality of their own that did not reduce to class exploitation; that cultural practices were the medium through which selves were produced; and that cultural practices were shaped and bounded by civilizations, including the modes of production of civilizations. It would offer a genealogical account of the ideology of racism, examining the modes of European domination of non-European peoples. It would analyze the microinstitutional mechanisms that sustained white supremacism, highlighting the various forms of Eurocentric dominance. And it would provide a macrostructural analysis of the exploitation and oppression of non-European peoples, tracking the variety and relationships between the various types of oppression.

That was a project for theorists of a scholarly bent, a title that West declined. He was an intellectual freedom fighter, not a scholar, theologian, or professional philosopher, he

explained. For twenty years he averaged over 150 lectures per year, speaking to academic and non-academic audiences on his broad range of topics. To social activists he often waxed on the cultural limitations of progressive organizations dominated by whites. DSA was, for him, a primary case in point. Since African Americans and other people of color usually perceived progressive white organizations as racially and culturally alien, West observed, they did not join them, which ensnared these organizations in a vicious circle. Even when white progressives made serious attempts to diversify, they failed because of their geographical and cultural remoteness from the everyday lives of people unlike themselves. This failure desensitized white organizations to the necessity of struggling against white supremacy, further widening the cultural gap between people of color and white activists.

West urged that the only way to break this vicious circle was for progressive organizations to privilege the issues of people of color, taking the liberationist option of siding with the excluded and oppressed. Strategies based on white guilt were paralyzing, both psychologically and politically, while strategies based on making white organizations more attractive to racial minorities had little effectiveness. The answer was for activist organizations and progressive religious communities to make a commitment of will to the specific struggles of people of color. It was pointless for progressive organizations to pursue diversity campaigns if they did not make the struggle against white supremacy their highest priority, he argued. There had to be a transformation of consciousness, one that was practical, convinced of the priority of racial justice, and not overburdened with useless guilt: "What is needed is more widespread participation by predominantly white democratic socialist organizations in antiracist struggles – whether those struggles be for the political, economic, and cultural empowerment of Latinos, blacks, Asians, and North Americans or anti-imperialist struggles against U.S. support for oppressive regimes in South Africa, Chile, the Philippines, and the occupied West Bank." 18

In liberation theology, West explained, this transformation of consciousness was called “conscientization.” It occurred only through an act of commitment that brought about a new awareness of marginalization, exclusion, or oppression from the perspective of those victimized by it. Only by taking the liberationist option would white activists comprehend or sustain their awareness of the crucial importance of struggling against racism in all its forms. Bonds of trust across racial lines would be forged only within contexts of struggle in which white activists privileged the concerns of people of color. West cautioned: “This interracial interaction guarantees neither love nor friendship. Yet it can yield more understanding and the realization of two overlapping goals – democratic socialism and antiracism. While engaging in antiracist struggles, democratic socialists can also enter into a dialogue on the power relationships and misconceptions that often emerge in multiracial movements for social justice in a racist society. Honest and trusting coalition work can help socialists unlearn Eurocentrism in a self-critical manner and can also demystify the motivations of white progressives in the movement for social justice.” 19

West’s involvement with DSA evoked a range of reactions that he encountered weekly on the lecture trail. White liberals blanched that he limited his effectiveness by identifying so explicitly with a socialist organization. Conservatives Red-baited him for it. Black nationalists heaped scorn on him for it. Radicals of various kinds chided him for hanging out with social democrats. West replied: “I’ve got to be organized with some group.” Socialism alone would never eradicate racism, and anti-racist struggle was fundamental to any progressive politics worth pursuing: “Yet a democratic socialist society is the best hope for alleviating and minimizing racism, particularly institutional forms of racism.” He chose DSA because it was multi-racial, multi-tendency, and comprehensive, standing for racial justice, economic democracy, feminism, environmentalism, and anti-imperialism: “We need the groups highlighting connection

and linkage in a time of balkanization and polarization and fragmentation. There's got to be some group that does this." 20

In his early career West shared the black radical and conventional left assumption that Martin Luther King Jr. was, at best, "a grand example of integrity and sacrifice," and not much more. Malcolm X was the more inspiring figure: "Malcolm X's voice was as fresh as ever. We were all convinced that Malcolm X would hold *our* position and have *our* politics if he were alive." In the 1970s King was not someone to be claimed for the road ahead, West recalled: "King was for us the Great Man who died for us—but not yet the voice we had to listen to, question, learn from and build on." 21

That began to change in the 1980s as West, Cone, David Garrow and others played up King's socialism and anti-imperialism. West rediscovered in King an exemplar of most of the things he cared about: "King's thought remains a challenge to us principally in that he accented the anticolonial, anti-imperialist, and antiracist consequences of taking seriously the American ideals of democracy, freedom, and equality. He never forgot that America was born out of revolutionary revolt and subversive rebellion against British colonialism and imperialism and that while much of white America viewed the country as the promised land, black slaves saw it as Egypt; that just as Europe's poor huddled masses were attracted to America, the largest black mass movement (led by Marcus Garvey) was set on leaving America! Through his prophetic Christian lens, King saw just how far America had swerved away from its own revolutionary past." 22

In 1986, speaking at a King symposium at the U.S. Capitol, West disavowed the conventional underestimation of King, observing that he embodied "the best of American Christianity." King was an exemplary organic intellectual, nonviolent resister, prophet, and egalitarian internationalist, West declared: "As an organic intellectual, he exemplifies the best of the life of the mind involved in public affairs; as a proponent of nonviolent resistance he holds out the only slim hope for social sanity in a violence-ridden world; as an American prophet he commands the respect even of those

who opposed him; and as an egalitarian internationalist he inspires all oppressed peoples around the world who struggle for democracy, freedom, and equality.” 23

In 1984 West moved to Yale Divinity School, where he won a joint appointment in American Studies, took part in campus protests for a clerical union and divestment from apartheid in South Africa, and was arrested and jailed. As punishment for his jailing the university cancelled his leave for spring 1987, forcing him to spend the semester commuting between Yale and the University of Paris. The following year he returned to Union Seminary, but in 1988 he moved to Princeton University as Professor of Religion and Director of Afro-American Studies. Princeton asked what it would take to get him; West replied that it would take a serious commitment to build a premier black studies program. He gave six years to building one centered on novelist Toni Morrison, then moved to Harvard in 1994 to join its black studies program, with a joint appointment at the Divinity School; literary theorist Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the architect of Harvard’s program, famously called it the “Dream Team” of black studies.

West’s renown in the academy ascended with each of these moves. Fundamentally he was a liberationist critic, but to the extent that he hung his reputation on familiar academic categories he did so as a religious/philosophical proponent of “prophetic pragmatism.” His chief academic work, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (1989), argued that the task of a revolutionary intellectual was to develop a counternarrative to the hegemonic texts and narrative of the prevailing order. In the U.S. American context, he contended, the best resources for this project were the pragmatist, Marxist, and Christian intellectual traditions. West prized pragmatism as the distinctive American contribution to Western philosophy; more importantly, it underwrote historicist social criticism pressing toward social transformation.

In West’s rendering of the American pragmatic tradition, Charles S. Peirce was the founder and methodologist, concerned chiefly with the pragmatic rendering of clear and distinct ideas; William James was an Emersonian moralist preoccupied with the

powers and anxieties of individuals; and John Dewey was the theorist of pragmatic historical consciousness and creative democracy. Following Rorty, West embraced a historicist neo-pragmatism that rejected all reductionist claims to objective knowledge. Unlike Rorty, however, West was religious, and unlike Gramsci, who took religion seriously only for political reasons, West's political reasons were trumped by existential concerns. He explained that the central narratives of the Bible and the insights of Christian thought into "the crises and traumas of life" were indispensable for his sanity. Christian narrative and insight held at bay, for him, "the sheer absurdity so evident in life, without erasing or eliding the tragedy of life." As a pragmatist, he focused on transient and provisional matters, not believing in extra-historical justifications or in defending faith with rational arguments. Yet as a Christian pragmatist his hope transcended the transient matters. Logical consistency mattered, West allowed; however, in the realm of faith, the ultimate issue was life or death, not the risk of logical inconsistency. 24

At the level of practical politics, where solidarity with the oppressed was at issue, it also helped to be religious. West allowed that one did not have to be religious to appreciate how oppressed people coped with their situation, "but if one is religious, one has wider access into their life-worlds." Similarly, he was a pragmatist without claiming that one had to be one to be effective. Some of his favorite thinkers were pragmatists, especially Du Bois, Gramsci, Dewey, James, Reinhold Niebuhr, sociologist C. Wright Mills, literary critic Lionel Trilling, and political philosopher Roberto M. Unger. But some of the greatest modern prophets had no truck with pragmatism: King, Rauschenbusch, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Dorothy Day. That didn't matter, West assured; what mattered was to struggle against oppression everywhere: "Prophetic pragmatism worships at no ideological altars. It condemns oppression anywhere and everywhere, be it the brutal butchery of third-world dictators, the regimentation and repression of peoples in the Soviet Union and Soviet-

bloc countries, or the racism, patriarchy, homophobia, and economic injustice in the first-world capitalist nations.” 25

For all of his success, and to some degree because of it, despair was a real option for West. He wrote constantly about “keeping faith” and “sustaining hope” partly as an admonition to himself. In 1993, the year before he moved to Harvard, he published two books that differently registered his deepening gloom about U.S. American culture and democracy, the condition of black America, and his deepening unease about both. One of these books, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America*, collected his recent articles on pragmatism, Marxism, racial justice, and progressive politics. The other book, *Race Matters*, launched him into the realm of American public celebrity just as he began to talk about taking leave of the U.S.A.

*Keeping Faith* disclosed that West felt increasingly exiled from the black community and despairing about American society. To be a black American intellectual was to be caught “between an insolent American society and an insouciant black community,” he lamented. White America as a whole was unwilling to learn much of anything from people of color, while black America took little interest in the life of the mind. Thus, “the African American who takes seriously the life of the mind inhabits an isolated and insulated world.” West cautioned that the problem was objective, not something that anyone could avoid with sufficient sincerity or skill. Because America was racist, and because there was no African American intellectual tradition to support black intellectuals, the ones that came along were condemned to “dangling status.” Black America had only two organic intellectual traditions, he explained: musical performance and black church preaching. Both were oral, improvisational, histrionic, and rooted in black life. Both traditions contained canons for assessing performance and models of past achievement. In the intellectual field, there was nothing to compare. West allowed that black America managed to produce a few remarkable intellectuals—Du Bois, Baldwin, Hurston, E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Ellison—but they were



exceptions and did not compare to the best black preachers and musicians. The only great black American intellectual thus far was novelist Toni Morrison. Aside from the handful of exceptions, black American intellectuals either capitulated to the white academy or catered to the “cathartic provincialism” of a black community that had no use for real intellectuals. 26

This dreary picture was getting worse, West warned: “As we approach the last few years of this century, black literate intellectual activity has declined in both quantity and quality.” Integration merely integrated black youths into decaying public high schools, bureaucratized universities, and “dull middlebrow colleges” that cared nothing about developing black intellectuals. More broadly, West found it “depressing and debilitating” to realize that race still mattered tremendously in virtually every sphere of U.S. American life. The “decline and decay in American life” seemed irreversible to him, making him grateful for his refuge in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the homeland of his wife Elleni Gebre Amlak. West reported that he was strongly tempted to make Ethiopia his home, not merely a refuge: “Not since the 1920s have so many black folk been disappointed and disillusioned with America. I partake of this black zeitgeist; I share these sentiments. Yet I try to muster all that is within me, including my rich African and American traditions, to keep faith in the struggle for human dignity and existential democracy.” 27

With the same mixture of gloom and willful hope he wrote a cry from the heart for the trade market, *Race Matters*, that made him famous far beyond the academy. Many of West’s new readers must have expected a sermon on the evils of white racism; instead he barely mentioned it, spending much of the book showing how the “decline and decay in American life” applied to black America. West took a hard line on what he called “nihilism in black America” and the shortcomings of contemporary black leaders. America as a whole shared the problem of nihilism, he assured, but it applied with a special vengeance to black America. Two sentences in the book’s introduction prepared

readers for the jeremiad that followed: “We have created rootless, dangling people with little link to the supportive networks – family, friends, school – that sustain some sense of purpose in life...Post-modern culture is more and more a market culture dominated by gangster mentalities and self-destructive wantonness.” 28

Capitalist culture bombarded its youthful consumers with titillating images designed to stimulate self-preoccupation, materialism, and anti-social attitudes, West contended; moreover, most American children lacked adequate parental guidance: “Most of our children – neglected by overburdened parents and bombarded by the market values of profit-hungry corporations – are ill-equipped to live lives of spiritual and cultural quality.” In a word, postmodern capitalist culture was deeply nihilistic. Philosophically, nihilism was the doctrine that there are no credible grounds for truth statements or standards; at the street level, it was the experience of “horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness.” In West’s telling, the culture of nihilism was especially toxic in poor black urban neighborhoods. It was the “major enemy of black survival in America,” more destructive than oppression or exploitation. The black American struggle against nihilistic despair was hardly new, he acknowledged. It was as old as the slaveships and auction blocks that ripped apart black families and condemned blacks to chattel servitude. Yet as recently as the early 1970s, black Americans had the lowest suicide rate in the U.S. A generation later, young black Americans had the highest rate. What had changed? What accounted for “this shattering of black civil society”? 29

West was not sure how much to blame the bitter ironies of racial integration or the collapse of black optimism after the King years had passed. He was more certain about two factors: “I believe that two significant reasons why the threat is more powerful now than ever before are the saturation of market forces and market moralities in black life and the present crisis in black leadership.” The flood of violence and sexual titillation that poured through the culture industries of television, radio, video, and music was

disastrous for black America, he argued. All Americans were influenced and degraded by the decadence of the media, which bombarded them constantly with images of depravity. The black underclass, however, facing special threats to its survival in the first place, was especially vulnerable to being damaged by it: "The predominance of this way of life among those living in poverty-ridden conditions, with a limited capacity to ward off self-contempt and self-hatred, results in the possible triumph of the nihilistic threat in black America." 30

More than ever, West argued, black America needed compelling black leaders; unfortunately, contemporary black leaders were grasping and morally unimpressive: "The present-day black middle class is not simply different than its predecessors – it is more deficient and, to put it strongly, more decadent. For the most part, the dominant outlooks and life-styles of today's black middle class discourage the development of high quality political and intellectual leaders." In fact, the worst aspects of America's general cultural decadence were "accentuated among black middle-class Americans." 31

The great black leaders of the past carried themselves with moral dignity, West explained. They wore suits and white shirts, conveyed a serious moral purpose, treated ordinary blacks with humble respect, and projected a bold, gut level anger at the condition of black America. "In stark contrast, most present-day black political leaders appear too hungry for status to be angry, too eager for acceptance to be bold, too self-invested in advancement to be defiant." On occasion they took a stab at prophetic speech, but that was "more performance than personal, more play-acting than heartfelt." Like other new entrants to the middle class culture of consumption, they were obsessed with status and addicted to self-gratification. Instead of raging against "the gross deterioration of personal, familial, and communal relations among African-Americans," they looked away from it, knowing they were poorly suited to condemn it.

32

Contemporary black political leaders sorted into three types, West argued: race-effacing managers, race-identifying protest leaders, and race-transcending prophets. The first type, epitomized by Los Angeles mayor Thomas Bradley, relied on political savvy and personal diplomacy to claim a place at the establishment table. The second type confined their attention to “black turf” and assiduously protected their hold over it. West cited Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan as an extreme example, but also assigned black nationalists and most leaders of the civil rights organizations to the second category. The third type was the ideal, which stood boldly for racial justice while transcending race as a category of personal identity and collective loyalty. Harlem civil rights leader Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. was one; more recently, Harold Washington, Chicago’s mayor in the mid-1980s, was another; Jesse Jackson tried to be one in his 1988 presidential race, but never quite overcame his opportunist past; West judged that his own generation had yet to produce one.

Black intellectuals sorted into similar types, by his account: race-distancing elitists, race-embracing rebels, and race-transcending prophets. The first type, impressed by its own cultivation and accomplishments, held themselves above other blacks; West cited the “mean-spirited” cultural critic Adolph Reed, Jr. as an example. The second type rebelled against the snobbish insularity of the white academy by creating a black-space version of it headed by themselves; West put most Afrocentrists in this category. The ideal, the race-transcending prophets, courageously fused the life of the mind with the struggle for justice without paying heed to social standing, career advancement, or intellectual fashions. West’s exemplar was James Baldwin; Oliver Cox also qualified; on the contemporary scene, only Toni Morrison deserved to be called a race-transcending prophetic intellectual. West stressed the negative: “This vacuum continues to aggravate the crisis of black leadership – and the plight of the wretched of the earth deteriorates.”

Anticipating the charge that he was too harsh, ungenerous, or opportunistically playing to a white audience, West admonished: “The crisis in black leadership can be remedied only if we candidly confront its existence.” He was not calling for a Messiah figure to replace Malcolm or King, because that was not the point, and there were always problems with messiah figures anyway. Malcolm said nothing about “the vicious role of priestly versions of Islam in the modern world,” and King was sexist and homophobic. West did not even believe that the answer was to build an organization dedicated to race-transcending prophetic politics, although he still hoped to see one emerge. What really mattered was to develop “new models of leadership and forge the kind of persons to actualize these models.” Black America needed race-transcending prophets that raged for racial justice and social justice for all: “To be a serious black leader is to be a race-transcending prophet who critiques the powers that be (including the black component of the Establishment) and who puts forward a vision of fundamental social change for all who suffer from socially induced misery.” 34

*Race Matters* brought West such a crush of national and international publicity that he moaned to friends about the ravages of over-exposure. The book’s paperback edition of 1994 was adorned with gushing reviews from major media outlets. *Newsday* called it “exciting,” “illuminating,” and filled with “profound and unsettling thoughts.” *The New York Times* applauded its “ferocious moral vision and astute intellect.” *Newsweek*, describing West as “an eloquent prophet with attitude,” enthused that his book was “devoted to kicking butt and naming names.” In a single sentence that placed West in the highest company imaginable, the *Washington Post Book World* declared that his book was as moving as any of King’s sermons, as profound as Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*, and as exhilarating as Baldwin’s early work. *Time*, in a quotable estimate that somehow did not make the book’s cover, declared: “Cornel West is one complex dude: brilliant scholar, political activist, committed Christian and soul brother down to the bone. At 40 he has become one of the most insightful and passionate analysts of America’s racial

dilemma to emerge in recent years, the architect of a post-civil rights philosophy of black liberation that is beginning to be heard across the country.” 35

From there West climbed to higher levels of public renown, attaining fixture status in the mass media through countless profiles, interviews, and guest appearances while confining his writing, for nearly a decade, to co-authored books on topical themes. He seemed to be too busy to write them on his own. A book that he co-authored with liberal rabbi Michael Lerner, *Jews & Blacks: Let the Healing Begin* (1995), which called for a new alliance between progressive Jews and blacks, got a whopping \$100,000 advance. A book that he co-authored with Harvard economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett, *The War Against Parents: What We Can Do For America's Beleaguered Moms and Dads* (1998), made a trade-market pitch for liberal economic and social policies while urging parents to strengthen their marital commitments. Meanwhile West appeared regularly on C-SPAN and other television networks, commented weekly on Tavis Smiley's National Public Radio program, served as a senior advisor to presidential candidate Bill Bradley in the 2000 Democratic primaries, campaigned for Ralph Nader in the 2000 presidential election, supported Al Sharpton's brief presidential bid in 2004, cut two rap CD's, *Sketches of My Culture* (2001, Artemis) and *Street Knowledge* (2004, Roc Diamond), and played the role of Councilor West, a member of the Council of Zion, in two of the *Matrix* movies, *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*. 36

He obviously enjoyed being famous, yet West was mindful of its perils. He was wary of being corrupted by adulation and enrichment. He winced at the obvious conflict between social justice militancy and celebrity success. And he understood that the more famous he became, the more *he* became the subject instead of anything that he said. Often he became an object of jealousy or resentment. Having stressed the shortcomings of others on his way up, West got a stream of tart responses. Sometimes it happened during the introduction of the speaker, after he had put himself out to speak at somebody's conference or group; often it happened in the discussion period after a

lecture. Black nationalists and black radicals charged that he sold out his race; in 1993 the African United Front tagged West as an “Uncle Tom,” claimed that he was “far more favorable to Jews than to Blacks,” and protested that he never presented “the Black side” of the conflict between American blacks and Jews. On the right, where West’s blistering critiques of white supremacy were noticed, he was often accused of epitomizing the radicalization and corruption of the academy. Meanwhile the hazards of his fame were noted by figures closer to him. One of his friends told *Time* magazine that part of West really wanted to be “the next H.N.I.C. [Head Negro in Charge, a satiric acronym with a long history]. It’s not just white folks holding him up.” James Cone told the same reporter that his friend’s celebrity was spiritually perilous: “One of the best ways to destroy someone is to expose and promote him. It’s very hard to be critical of a system that makes a hero out of you.” 37

Friendly reviewers more or less in West’s intellectual orbit mixed critical jabs with the compliments. African American studies scholar Randal Jelks, in the *Christian Century*, considered *Race Matters* an effective “popularization of West’s thought,” but protested that West was too gloomy, showed no sense of humor, and put a misleading title on the book; *Race Matters*, the title, smacked of racial essentialism. Womanist theologian Delores Williams, in *Theology Today*, lauded West’s “brilliant analysis” before criticizing his claim to speak the truth to power with love. It was one thing for King to talk about loving white people into repentance, Williams admonished, but King had millions of supporters to back up his challenge to white supremacy. Who was West, and what did he have, to compare with that? And if West really cared about ordinary people, why were his writings loaded with Latin terms and academic jargon? 38

Friends and foes alike questioned the quality of West’s scholarship. Stanley Aronowitz, one of his closest friends and collaborators, was fond of saying in the 1990s that West’s scholarship had not started yet. *Time* magazine echoed a common complaint that his writings were vague and utopian. In 1995 *New Republic* literary editor Leon

Wieseltier put it much worse, declaring that West's work was "noisy, tedious, slippery...sectarian, humorless, pedantic and self endeared." In Wieseltier's telling, West did not make arguments, he merely declaimed. He was not a philosopher, but merely cobbled together snatches of philosophies. West's eccentricity was surpassed only by his vanity, which was enormous, Wieseltier opined. His books were monuments "to the devastation of a mind by the squalls of theory." In sum, in a quote immortalized by repeated citation: "They are almost completely worthless." 39

The latter attack was delivered by a prominent neo-liberal in the flagship journal of neo-liberal politics. Its parade of mean-spirited exaggerations made West more vulnerable to attacks not deriving from the political Right, usually without citation. It also inspired and fueled ferocious ridicule from the Right, where Wieseltier was nearly always cited gleefully. Conservative activist David Horowitz offered a typical rendering. In 1999, reviewing the *Cornel West Reader*, Horowitz invoked Wieseltier's charges, added a few of his own about West's "intellectual superficiality" and "blasts of hot air," and condemned West's friendships with Sharpton and Louis Farrakhan. In the 1990s West cultivated friendships with Farrakhan and other black nationalist leaders in an attempt to build bridges between them and other groups. In particular he tried to mediate the hostility between black nationalists and Jews. To Horowitz, that was the key to West's eminent stature: his oxymoronic capacity to pose simultaneously as a racial healer and a "bedfellow of racial extremists." West got away with it, Horowitz contended, only because no one took him seriously: "He is the quintessential non-threatening radical, an African American who can wave the bloody shirt to orchestrate the heartstrings of white guilt, while coming to dinner at the Harvard faculty club and acting as a gentleman host." 40

Horowitz's right-wing activism was beyond the pale for anyone in West's intellectual orbit. However, many of West's usual allies concurred that he took his mission of racial reconciliation a step too far in courting influence with Farrakhan. In his early writings



West condemned Farrakhan's characterization of Judaism as a "gutter religion" as "despicable." Later he spoke more guardedly about the "underdog resentment and envy" that fueled black anti-Semitism, and in 1995 he supported Farrakhan's Million Man March. Trading on his public prominence, West told black nationalists that overcoming white supremacy was something they could not do by themselves. He urged Farrakhan to repudiate anti-Semitism and acknowledge the equal humanity of all persons. Michael Lerner, discussing with West the possibilities of reconciliation between blacks and Jews, drew the line at Farrakhan, calling him a "racist dog." West replied characteristically, "I wouldn't call the brother a racist dog but a xenophobic spokesperson when it comes to dealing with Jewish humanity." 41

If racial healing was to extend beyond the ranks of liberals, the humanity of persons on all sides of the conflict had to be acknowledged as a first principle. Stepping straight into the crossfire between black nationalists and Jews, West urged friends on both sides to stop the vicious cycle of vituperation, realizing that he risked his reputation and his efficacy as a racial healer by doing so. Ironically, he took his greatest risk during the same period in which he received a barrage of criticism for selling out.

Conservative magazines regularly complained that only conservatives and a smattering of (usually Jewish) neo-liberals like Wieseltier had the nerve to criticize Cornel West. That was a plausible impression if one relied on television and conservative magazines for information. In the academy and political left, however, criticizing West was a favorite pastime. Many scholars blasted him for blaming the victim in his critique of black nihilism. Cultural critic Nick De Genova protested that West sounded "like the classic example of a colonized elite, trapped in an existential condition of self-hatred and shame because he has come to view his own people as undignified, indecent, backward, and uncouth." Social critic Eric Lott similarly ripped West for coming perilously close to denying the humanity of poor blacks; Lott

contended that West's entire "lexicon of urban savagery" was disastrously wrongheaded, frightening, and reactionary, as well as unsupported by evidence. 42

Political scientist Floyd W. Hayes III, black studies scholars Lewis Gordon and Peniel E. Joseph, and philosophers Charles Mills and Clevis Headley concurred that West's critique of Afro-nihilism was hard to distinguish from blame-the-victim conservatism. Hayes protested that instead of stressing the ravages of white supremacy and capitalist exploitation, West recycled the old "culture of poverty" elitism that blamed "impoverished Black Folk for their own predicament and for being unable to rid themselves of it." Gordon added that West underestimated Du Bois and denigrated the black Marxist tradition, especially C. L. R. James and Walter Rodney. Joseph put it more hotly, blasting West for his "victim-blaming and excoriation of contemporary Black leadership." West's account of black intellectualism rested on a method of "demonization and invocation," Joseph argued. He lifted Toni Morrison above all others by invocation, with no argument, put down everyone else, and did not bother even to mention the radical black humanist tradition of Angela Davis, Huey Newton, Fred Hampton, and Vicki Garvin. 43

Headley admonished that West's evasion of philosophy was literal and not something to be proud of. West never developed a serious argument, Headley contended; he merely patched together "various rhetorics of liberation for the purpose of building progressive coalitions." In Headley's judgment, West's writings amounted, at best, to "an impressive collage of political slogans" that infused pragmatism with his magnetic personality: "He substitutes intellectual seduction in place of rational persuasion." Adding to the objections of Hayes, Gordon, Joseph, Mills, and Headley that West spent much of his breakthrough book blaming blacks for their nihilism, feminist theorist Iris M. Young protested that West and Hewlett stooped to a similar anti-feminism in their critique of American family life. It was offensive enough when conservatives made alarmist statements about the downfall of marriage, Young contended, "but coming

from supposed progressives, they are frightening! Privileging marriage and genetic ties of parenting in this way is heterosexist and insulting to adoptive parents, and wrongfully supports continued stigmatization of single mothers.” 44

Philosopher John Pittman chided West for conjuring a pragmatic ethical Karl Marx remarkably like Cornel West. Philosopher George Yancy worried that West relied too heavily on religion, which in his case rested on a thin crypto-fideism. Since West’s claims for religion were merely pragmatic and historicist, how could much of a religion come from that? Comparative literature scholar Nada Elia advised West to stop complaining about feeling exiled. For one thing, he exaggerated his suffering; for another, to the extent that he was truly marginalized, he was free to do the work of criticism that radical intellectuals were supposed to do. Political philosopher Lucius Turner Outlaw, Jr. suggested, disapprovingly, that West criticized Du Bois for failing to deal with major European thinkers because West wanted to lift himself above Du Bois.

45

West endured the attacks from the right with as little replying as possible. There was little to be gained by defending himself from ridicule or by debating people with whom he shared nothing. He engaged his other critics wholeheartedly, without noting the irony of the personal offense that his writings of the early ‘90s caused. No one was more generous with praise or charitable affection than West. He wrote effusive blurbs for dozens of fellow authors, constantly praised colleagues as the “greatest” this or that, and routinely greeted acquaintances as long-missed sisters and brothers. Often he explained that public intellectualism and original scholarship were different things. Contrary to Aronowitz’s implication, West had no plans for a scholarly phase. The Gramscian task of engaging the dominant culture from a left-intellectual standpoint was vocation enough for him.

On most points of criticism he was a model of respectful engagement, though West made an exception for the charge that he blamed the victim in *Race Matters*. To him, this

charge was a “bizarre,” “sophomoric,” and “leftist knee-jerk” myth that somehow survived his many writings on white racism, a response that ignored the point of his critics that *Race Matters* vastly outsold his other writings. As for the black intellectual tradition, he respected it greatly, but not to the point of indulging Gordon’s filiopiety. Du Bois produced outstanding work in historical sociology, West acknowledged; on the other hand, Du Bois was a Victorian elitist and Enlightenment rationalist who did not compare intellectually to the great musical geniuses of black America. Moreover, most of the black Marxists extolled by Gordon were Leninists. As for Joseph’s charge that West dismissed black nationalism, West replied, “ludicrous.” *Prophesy Deliverance!* lauded the black nationalist tradition, and West’s comradely friendships with black nationalist leader Maulana Karenga, Afrocentric theorist Molefi Asante, and “the beloved Minister Louis Farrakhan” were matters of public record. He added that his \$10,000 contribution to the Black Radical Congress surely said something about his respect for black nationalism; to Joseph he appealed, “please do more homework.” 46

To academic critics of his improvisational style, he gave short shrift. West told Headley that obviously he did not share Headley’s devotion to philosophical professionalism, cognitive models, formal analysis, and the positivist distinction between reason and emotion. Thus it was not surprising that Headley and others like him did not comprehend West’s intellectual style, though West wished they would recognize its legitimacy. To Young he replied that it should be possible to defend the progressive possibilities of heterosexual marriage from a feminist and egalitarian standpoint without being accused of bigotry against gays, lesbians, and single parents. Repeating a central argument of his book on the family, West contended that children did best when raised by two biological parents that were married to each other. The empirical evidence on this point was terribly clear, and important, he urged. To set progressivism against it was disastrous for progressivism and for children: “We make it clear that this does not stigmatize single mothers and fathers, disqualify loving gay or

lesbian parents, or preclude successful adoption of children.” He took no interest in bolstering discrimination against gay or lesbian parents. Progressivism had to be against that, just as it had to “put a premium on the well-being of children.” 47

To Pittman he replied that every insightful interpretation of Marx had background premises. Georg Lukacs described a neo-Hegelian Marx, Alexandre Kojève described a Heideggerian Marx, and Louis Althusser described a structuralist Marx. It would have been odd if ethical pragmatist West had not played up the ethical aspects of Marx’s thought. To Yancy he acknowledged that he tended to be silent about the philosophic and religious “more” beyond utility and politics. To pursue the more was to lapse into metaphysics or onto-theology, which he eschewed. That did not make him a pragmatic reductionist, West cautioned. He treasured the irreducible mystery of being and emphasized the tragicomic “funk” of living, suffering, struggling, and dying. West prized Anton Chekhov above all thinkers, often calling himself a “Chekhovian Christian.” To him, Chekhov was the greatest literary artist of the modern age because he was “the pre-eminent poet of the funk of life, its tragicomic darkness, mystery, and incongruity, with a blues conclusion: keep lovin’ and fightin’ for justice anyway, i.e., regardless of the situation.” Chekhov inveighed against evil while spurning the aid of religion; as a Chekhovian Christian, West held to a “blues-ridden gospel” of resistance to evil that trusted in the possibility of divine goodness: “Ours is in the trying – the rest is not our business.” 48

To Elia he replied that he reveled in his marginality from the Black community and American culture while feeling estranged from neither. To Outlaw he denied that he was driven by his considerable “notoriety” or even his ambivalence about it to place himself above Du Bois. West criticized Du Bois only because Du Bois deserved it, not to make himself number one: “My Chekhovian Christian voice simply cuts deeper and thereby is more truthful than Du Bois’s Goethean Enlightenment view that undergirded his marvelous scholarship.” 49

Repeatedly, realizing that being exalted made him a target, West admonished friendly critics not to judge him by an inflated standard of expectation. In particular he asked them not to imagine that he aimed “to save American civilization or achieve greatness owing to white recognition.” He did not expect to be remembered as a historic figure, and he doubted there was a “Westian” ideology or position. Intellectually, he was someone who looked at the world through various lenses, not a grand theorist. He was keenly aware that his prominence had much to do with having come along at the right moment: “My sheer level of privilege and scope of exposure is unprecedented.” 50

West’s immense good will and generous spirit helped him get on with academics that thought they better deserved to be famous. By 1999, when he annotated and published *The Cornel West Reader*, he was long practiced at explaining that he rejected the narrowly academic view of academic work. He believed that the academy needed to address audiences and topics outside the academy, a view that he featured prominently in the reader. In 2001, however, he acquired a president at Harvard who had a narrow idea of what a Harvard professor should be and an amazingly obtuse understanding of West’s value to the university.

West had never met Harvard’s new president, economist Lawrence Summers, before being summoned to a fateful meeting with him in October 2001. Though Summers had not read West’s books, he had strong opinions about them that closely resembled the Wieseltier genre of ridicule. He blasted West for producing a rap CD that embarrassed Harvard, reproached him for missing classes to campaign for Bradley, opined that “no one in his right mind” supported Sharpton, admonished him to write a major scholarly work that established him as a real academic, chastised him for giving too many A’s to students, and exhorted West to start writing the kind of books that academic journals would review. In other words, West needed to legitimize his appointment as a distinguished University Professor. Summers proposed to have regular meetings with West to monitor his progress. In reality, West had not missed any classes while

campaigning for Bradley or anyone else, one of his courses had an enrollment of 700 students, and he had already written a scholarly tome, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, and published a collection of academic essays, *Keeping Faith*. 51

Feeling attacked and insulted, West decided to resign quietly from Harvard and return to Princeton. It seemed pointless to fight with Summers, nor did he relish the prospect of a media spectacle. For two months he refused to speak to reporters about the rumored episode, but the story exploded into a page one spectacle anyway. As West later recalled, the dominant story line was of a principled president “upholding standards and refusing to give in to an undeserving and greedy professor.” Though many Harvard students defended West, *The Harvard Crimson*, a student newspaper, fed the press frenzy by recycling Wieseltier’s polemic and mocking West’s purported vanity and hypocrisy. Recalling his attack on the hedonism of the black middle class, the paper found a contradiction “between West’s prophetic contempt for material gain and his exquisitely tailored suits, comfortably tenured lifestyle, lucrative speaking gigs and fancy cars.” Fareed Zakaria piled on in *Newsweek*, recycling Wieseltier’s litany yet again; *Newsweek* readers were assured that “noisy, self-endearing, completely worthless” and all the rest were exactly right. *The New Republic* added that West epitomized the contemporary mutation of the public intellectual: a celebrity master of public relations. Brilliantly packaging himself as a brand, the magazine explained, West kept himself in the news and choreographed his controversy with Harvard. Instead of producing serious scholarship, he offered “tossed-off books, rap CDs, and shallow public disputes over the respect due to him.” 52

The Summers episode set up West for a media bashing far beyond his collective past experience, a point West made vividly in his second meeting with Summers. By then Summers realized that the media controversy was bad for Harvard and his presidency; he thanked West for not playing the race card. West replied that in the U.S. “the whole deck was full of race cards,” but there were additional issues at stake. He would have

welcomed a serious exchange about academic freedom and the public responsibilities of the academy. As it was, he found himself pilloried in the media, because Summers “had authorized every xenophobic and conservative or neoliberal newspaper writer in the country to unleash pent-up hostility toward me.” In West’s telling, Summers apologized to him for setting off a damaging “misunderstanding,” then told a reporter he had not apologized, then told West the reporter misquoted him. West, after learning otherwise from the reporter, blasted Summers on the Tavis Smiley Show as “the Ariel Sharon of American higher education,” an arrogant bully unsuited for his position. That set off another media explosion, this time featuring the charge that West had to be anti-Semitic for linking Harvard’s first Jewish president with Sharon. West later recalled ruefully that most of his Harvard colleagues sat back and said nothing while he was roasted in the media, which showed the typical “spinelessness in the academy.” Undergoing surgery for cancer, he waited for the controversy to burn itself out and returned to Princeton. 53

To West the entire episode was pathetic and damaging. He later reflected that it should have been possible for him to disagree with Summers “without being subjected to slightly veiled threats and overt disrespect.” Harvard was supposed to stand for academic freedom. Having sought to facilitate greater mutual respect between American blacks and Jews, West regretted the symbolism of having clashed with Summers. Above all, he regretted that for all of his fame as a public intellectual, the controversy offered a chastening warning to others who shared his belief in the necessity of academic engagement with popular culture. In a sequel to *Race Matters* titled *Democracy Matters* (2004), he put it with a slightly defiant edge: “As one who is deeply committed to the deep democratic tradition in America and to engaging youth culture, I have no intention of cutting back on my academic and outreach activities, because the effort to shatter the sleepwalking of youths who are shut out of the



intellectual excitement and opportunity of the academy is such a vital one for our democracy.” 54

*Race Matters* was about the social ravages of white supremacy; *Democracy Matters* was about the degradation of American democracy in the age of American empire. Writing against the background of the Bush administration’s imperial disaster in Iraq, but also implicitly reflecting his vigorous opposition to Al Gore in the 2000 presidential election, West declared: “The rise of an ugly imperialism has been aided by an unholy alliance of the plutocratic elites and the Christian Right, and also by a massive disaffection of so many voters who see too little difference between two corrupted parties, with blacks being taken for granted by the Democrats, and with the deep disaffection of youth.” Since the Republican and Democratic parties were both owned by corporate money and interests, choosing between them was like choosing between “the left-wing and right-wing versions of the Dred Scott decision.” 55

Three dogmas of modern American life played the leading roles in degrading American democracy, he contended. Capitalist fundamentalism (the glorification of unfettered markets and market rationality) cast aside the public good while delivering the world to the corporations. Aggressive militarism (the pursuit of global military empire) imposed the will of American elites on other nations. Escalating authoritarianism (the diminishment of individual rights) betrayed hard-won liberties in the name of national security. Taken together, West argued, “we are experiencing the sad American imperial devouring of American democracy,” which amounted to “an unprecedented gangsterization of America.” 56

In West’s view, the Republican Party was myopically mendacious in promoting capitalist fundamentalism, aggressive militarism, and authoritarianism, while the Democratic Party was pathetically spineless in promoting weaker versions of the same thing. “The saturation of market forces in American life generates a market morality that undermines a sense of meaning and larger purpose,” he wrote. Capitalist

fundamentalism reduced all values to market value, pitting government institutions against each other in a race to the bottom that shredded social safety nets and corrupted societies “all the way up.” Worst of all, fifteen years after the end of the Cold War, America was more deeply and pervasively militaristic than ever. 57

Nihilism in America was a two-sided coin, West observed. On one side it was the despair of worthlessness and believing in nothing that afflicted Americans of all races and classes, which was especially devastating in poor communities. On the other side it was the ruthless abuse of power that nihilistic elites waged on a daily basis, which also fell heaviest on America’s most vulnerable communities: “Political nihilism now sets the tone for public discourse, and market moralities now dictate the landscape of a stifled American democracy.” For West the administration of George W. Bush was the showcase example, serving up fear and greed, tax cuts for the rich, and imperialism: “A political nihilist is one who is not simply intoxicated with the exercise of power but also obsessed with stifling any criticism of that exercise of power. He will use clever arguments to rationalize his will to power and deploy skillful strategies, denying the pain and suffering he may cause, in order to shape the world and control history in light of the pursuit of power.” 58

In theory, the Democratic Party existed to “fight the plutocracy,” exacting concessions from the corporate class that benefited the majority. In fact, West lamented, contemporary Democratic leaders fell woefully short of Franklin Roosevelt and even Lyndon Johnson. At least Johnson recognized and cared that poor whites and most blacks had the same fundamental interests. By contrast, current Democrats like John Kerry and Hillary Clinton were “paternalistic nihilists,” slick professionals who spoke blandly for democracy with no heart-felt rage at the injustices of the system. 59

West had a version of American exceptionalism that contrasted with America’s self-congratulatory versions. The American democratic experiment was unique only in the sense that most Americans refused to acknowledge “the deeply racist and imperial

roots of our democratic project," he argued: "No other democratic nation revels so blatantly in such self-deceptive innocence, such self-paralyzing reluctance to confront the nightmare of its own history." Despite having grown huge and powerful, American civilization refused to grow up. It was stuck in an adolescent refusal to face painful truths about itself, which made America unable to negotiate tempting options that were bad for itself and others. West put it bluntly: "Race has always been the crucial litmus test for such maturity in America. To acknowledge the deeply racist and imperial roots of our democratic project is anti-American only if one holds to a childish belief that America is pure and pristine, or if one opts for self-destructive nihilistic rationalizations." 60

Though he was often accused of selling out racial justice to further his own celebrity, or of imagining that he was the only "race-transcending prophet" of his time, West was emphatic that ignoring or minimizing the matter of race would not make anything better. There were many issues to address in struggling for social justice, he urged, but race was nearly always intertwined with them: "Niggerization in America has always been the test case for examining the nihilistic threats to America. For so long niggerization has been viewed as marginal and optimism central to America. But in our time, when we push race to the margins we imperil all of us, not just peoples of color." 61

*Democracy Matters* got his usual mix of praise and brickbats. *The Village Voice* lauded West as "a thinker of dazzling erudition, whose critiques are inevitably balanced by an infectious optimism and magnanimity of spirit." *The Seattle Times* called him "a compelling and sought-after deep thinker in a nation weaned on five-second sound bites." Womanist ethicist Cheryl Sanders enthused in the *Christian Century* that the book was an inspiration and blessing to her: "What I love about his new book, *Democracy Matters*, is how deeply motivated and illuminated I felt when thinking through his formulation of democratic solutions to the problem of American imperialism." *Daily*

*Princetonian* arts writer Hamid Khanbhai lauded West as “a polemicist with all the pizzazz of a passionate gospel preacher,” though he worried about West’s eagerness to implant democracy in the Middle East. Historian Daniel Levine, writing in *America*, commended West’s politics, but criticized his “platitudinous” style, “outright banality,” and “sloppy thinking.” *New Criterion* reviewer Mark Bauerlein, upholding a conservative tradition, recycled Wieseltier yet again before assuring that West’s latest book was no better. West never reasoned his way to conclusions or even appealed to empirical evidence, Bauerlein complained; he simply made charges and declared things with overheated language. In Bauerlein’s judgment, *Democracy Matters* showed what happened when an intellectual was hailed by the mass media, “courted by rival universities, and invited, interviewed, and idolized without end. The process is fatal to the scholarly intelligence.” 62

As a writer West sometimes did not get through; the torrential riffs that made him a sensational speaker often did not sing as well on the page. Many of his reviewers would have done better, however, had they acknowledged that they did not know what to make of someone who glided effortlessly from Matthew Arnold to C. L. R. James to Socrates to John Coltrane to Kierkegaard to Michel Foucault to Toni Morrison to Dostoyevsky to Alain Badiou to Jay-Z and Outkast, finding juxtapositions that only he would have perceived. There was simply no one to compare to West, until his protégé Michael Eric Dyson made a similar splash. West enthralled lecture audiences like no other intellectual of his time, taught in prisons, wrote about hip-hop, and recorded CD’s that sought to convey the greatness of the black tradition to youths who would not have touched his books. Most reviewers that chastised him lacked even a fraction of his intellectual range. Somehow, reviewers who knew nothing of postcolonial theory knew that his use of it had to be worthless.

On the right, the need to disparage West was an ideological necessity; for many others, the jealousy factor played a role; in addition, his dramatic expansiveness made

him easy to caricature. He persistently overdressed in informal contexts while criticizing other black intellectuals for wearing “shabby” clothes. Sometimes a serious point got lost in his maze of allusions. *In These Times* writer Salim Muwakkil noted that there was “something excessive about him.” But in a generation that produced excessive wailing about the decline of public intellectualism, the lack of engagement between the academy and public, and the loss of a progressive Christian voice in the public square, Cornel West was the towering exception. He made himself a target for criticism by achieving what others claimed was no longer possible. 63

He never really changed, notwithstanding the Left critics who liked his early writings and claimed that he sold out later. From the beginning West was committed to a Christian liberationist vision of social justice and reconciliation, though some readers wrongly took his early writings to be Marxism dressed up as Christian thought. West was not “really” a Marxist who used Christianity; it was more like the other way around. He began as a liberationist social critic committed to building progressive multiracial coalitions and he remained one. He moved easily among groups that had little in common with each other and that sometimes could not stand each other: *Monthly Review* Marxists, postmodern deconstructionists, black nationalists, civil rights leaders, anti-imperialist activists, conservative and liberal academics, DSA social democrats, black church pastors and congregants, churchgoing white Protestants and Catholics.

But West was not satisfied with bringing together likeminded progressives from different backgrounds. He worked at the boundaries of his wide-ranging social existence, struggling, above all, to bring black nationalists and black radicals into dialogue and solidarity work with white progressives. West realized that he jeopardized his favored standing with white progressives and some black civil rights leaders by cultivating bonds of trust with Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam. That he took the risk was typical of him. “The tensions between blacks and Jews are so volatile

and our national discourse regarding difficult issues is so stunted that thoughtful dialogue is nearly impossible," he lamented. By playing close to the edge of the field, he jeopardized his capacity to be a racial healer. For West, however, the spiritual principle at issue trumped the questionable politics of the situation. The love ethic of Christianity compelled him to appeal to the humanity of anti-Semitic black nationalists just as it compelled him to look for it in the racist beneficiaries of white supremacism. 64

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