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A RECURRING MALADY: THE POVERTY OF BOURGEOIS CRITICISM

by Chuck Hopkins

In his piece on the malaise of Amiri Baraka's recent change from a kind of narrow nationalism to revolutionary nationalism in which scientific socialism is espoused, Norman Harris undertakes a criticism of the apparent lack of serious analysis which could justify and explain this ideological transformation. After setting forth his own commentary on the matter, Harris concludes that due to the lack of systematic analysis, "in itself," the change represents "a qualitative move backwards." While this writing is not intended to be a defense or explanation of the various political manifestations we have witnessed in Baraka over the last several years, I do feel the need to make some comments on Harris' method of critique.

Karl Marx was fond of pointing out that if the appearance of things coincided with their essence then there would be no need for science. In fact, it was this assumption which led him to undertake his massive work we know as Capital. In his day, bourgeois social scientists, confining themselves to a study of phenomena which only appeared to represent reality, claimed that there was no exploitation in capitalist society. In their view profit did not come from the exploitation of workers, but resulted from capital itself invested by the capitalist in production.

This explanation, of course, did not satisfy Marx. Employing the dialectical materialist method and drawing from his own experiences in workers' struggles, he rejected what appeared to be an equitable purchase-and-scale transaction between the worker and the capitalist. Marx discovered that behind the phenomenon, the semblance of an equal exchange, was the very
essence of exploitation under capitalist production. He showed that human labor power was a unique kind of exchange commodity in that it was capable of creating/producing material values. In addition, he demonstrated that the values human labor power produces are worth a great deal more than the wages paid by the capitalist. Thus, that unpaid for surplus value the capitalist appropriates as profit.

The results which Marx derived from his study were, of course, very important. In fact, they are still being felt all over the world. But equally important was the methodology he employed. In his attack upon the bourgeoisie, he could not utilize bourgeois methodology. It was necessary to go beyond superficial appearances and discover the real essence of capitalist political economy, its material basis and inner workings. And, of course, after taking capitalism apart this way, he was able to turn around and put it back together, but with the knowledge to explain/justify each part. It was the utilization of this methodology, then, that led Marx to conclude that because of the material contradiction between the worker and capitalist, working people as a conscious revolutionary class must be the leading agent in the overthrowing and transformation of the capitalist system.

From the standpoint of methodology, social theorists today are faced with the same problem that confronted Marx, i.e., resolving the contradiction between appearance and essence. Particularly for Afro-American theorists, the task is a difficult one. Confronted with the material reality of both racism and exploitation, we have had great difficulty in trying to plow through the layers of phenomena monopoly capitalism places in our path, and
locating its inner workings, its fundamental contradictions. But this
difficulty will be made impossible if we expect to resolve the appearance/
 essence contradiction through the use of bourgeois methodology. We cannot
succeed as black social theorists in realizing a theoretical totality
(which is the task before us) by employing the methodology of bourgeois
social science.

In his article, Harris does in fact pose the correct question regarding
Baraka's ideological change. He asks: What occurred in the real world to
cause this shift?³ If we are to be successful in explaining the change we
will have to focus upon "the real world." But after having raised what
essentially is the correct question, Harris immediately takes flight from the
world, i.e., from the material base. Before leaving, however, he does
mention one phenomenon which might have been fruitful had he pursued it.
This was the question on whether the change was due to the National Black
Political Assembly's inability to attract more black elected officials.⁴
This would have been at least a starting point for trying to get at the
essence of the problem.

But rather than pursuing this kind of question, i.e., one which would
necessarily involve some knowledge of his subject's practice, Harris chooses
to simply examine some of Baraka's ideas as reflected in several of his
political writings. In his paragraph on methodology he clearly indicates
how restricted his analysis will be. He states that he will look at Baraka's
"philosophical offerings" and his "political writings." He also states that
a part of his methodological approach will involve looking at how the ideas
of Marx, Nkrumah, Nyerere, and Cabral influenced Baraka in his "new position." This, then, is Harris' method. He does not examine Baraka in the material world, in struggle, in his practice. We see nothing of a Baraka in process interacting with the world through various programs and organizations. We see nothing of the successes and failures of the practice which has been informing Baraka's ideology over the last decade or so.

Without a doubt, subjecting the evolution and development of Baraka to some real theoretical examination is one of the necessary tasks we have before us, but little of anything can be gained by merely following the methods of bourgeois social science, accumulating "objective facts" and manipulating them to deduce some preconceived conclusion. But we are still left with the question of why Harris chooses such an idealist and subjective method of his study.

Perhaps it is possible to gain some understanding from a statement he makes in the beginning of the piece: "From a utilitarian point of view," he states, "the role that objective, quantifiable analysis play in this shift is crucial." Well, what is an "objective, quantifiable analysis?" Does this statement indicate a belief on Harris' part that "out there," standing alone are neutral phenomena waiting to be collected, quantified, categorized, and analyzed, thereby revealing truth? Can we snatch a handful of Baraka's writings out of their social context, select some quotes and then claim that we have explained why his political stance has changed? Can we then go ahead, based upon these selected and abstracted data, and pass judgement as to the regressive/reactionary nature of Baraka's new position? Harris says yes, and this is exactly what he has done.
The main reason, then, for the invalidity of Harris' critique is the
impoverishment of the analysis resulting directly from his methodology. Why
is this so? As I alluded to in the beginning of this essay, one of the
cardinal principles of bourgeois social theory is that everything is exactly
as it appears. From this assumption flows the rampant empiricism we find
in much of bourgeois writing. In fact, under the rule of the bourgeoisie and
through their universities in particular, the great task of creating social
theory is reduced to a mere gathering in of what is named "objective facts"
leading to the accumulation and manipulation of abstract data to deduce some
(desired?) conclusion. Such a mystification of the world under the guise of
being "scientific" and "objective" can only serve to protect the profiteers
of the status quo, the bourgeoisie. Because if we are prevented from under-
standing the society in which we live, then what possibility is there for us
to change it?

We have in Harris' critique a clear example of the poverty of bourgeois
criticism. The methodology is so imbued with a positivist empiricism that
the resulting piece is merely a simple accumulation of decided upon "facts"
and conclusions. In his attempt to provide a theoretical explanation of
Baraka, Harris is apparently unaware of his own biased presuppositions. His
empiricist search for "objective facts" itself is illusionary in that it is
theory (in this instance his own) that names certain phenomena, and not
others, "objective" in the first place. For example, would the incorporation
of Baraka's interactions with his environment, his practice, into Harris'
methodological scheme result in a different conclusion regarding the
regressive nature of the new position? I think it would.
Before concluding, I have a few comments on the question of the regressive nature of Baraka's new position. I have argued that Harris' position on this is invalid. But I do not wish to stop at this point without suggesting what I believe to be a more positive approach to the question. In other words, I do not believe that it is merely enough to level negative critiques, but we (the black left, activists, human beings, etc.) must also try to come together to unify ourselves.

First of all, in order to decide the question of whether or not the new position/movement is progressive or regressive, we would have to have some common understanding of criteria for indicating the terms. In my view, as change and development takes place in the world, the consciousness of human beings, i.e., our ideas, theories, etc., change also. For example, in America during the 1800's the changes which were taking place as far as the growing industrialization in the North led to a change in many people's consciousness regarding their ideas about slavery. And if we can agree that wage labor is a step above slave labor as far as human social relations are concerned, then we would have to conclude that the anti-slavery people, the Union army, etc. represented progress. The Civil War was progressive.

So, when is a phenomenon progressive? In my view it would be progressive when it has its basis in the changing and developing material world and corresponds to the new conditions of the material world. By progressive I mean one who, when confronted with a changing and new situation, is able to grow and develop, improve oneself, and become viable in the new situation. In opposition to this stipulation, of course, would be regressive--the inability to locate oneself in one's material environment and to grow and develop as the material environment grows and develops.
Thus, in order to adequately explain the change in Baraka's political stance and to decide upon its progressive or regressive character, we would have to focus upon, first, change and development in America (its inner workings), change and development in people's consciousness and the relationship between Baraka's changes to all of this. Next, we would identify his new practice and attempt to ascertain whether or not it is enabling him as a black revolutionary to be a more viable force in his environment. I end with a question: Is there anything to be learned from the practice of the United Brotherhood of Newark during the sixties and the present situation wherein black Mayor Kenneth Gibson has no qualms about turning racist policemen loose on black and Puerto Rican communities?

Footnotes

1 Norman Harris, "A Recurring Malady: Imamu Baraka's Move to the Left," Endarch: Journal of Theory, Vo., 1, No. 1 (Fall 1974), pp. 5-20
2 Ibid., p. 18
3 Ibid., p. 5
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., pp. 5-6
6 Ibid., p. 5