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Locating Black Radical Thought

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Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 328 pp.

“The link that is being forged between Jamaicans and coloured Americans,” the Jamaican radical Wilfrid A. Domingo wrote in the summer of 1946, “is valuable. Both groups are trying to span the sea and establish an *entente cordiale* which can be of inestimable value to both groups in the future.” Writing in the Kingston daily newspaper, *Public Opinion*, which was affiliated to Norman Manley’s People’s National Party, Domingo’s particular brand of nationalism was a regular fixture in Jamaican politics by the mid-1940s. A fire-brand journalist and, as Margaret Stevens (2012) has recently put it, political “chameleon”, Domingo’s direct participation in Jamaican politics was presaged by over three decades of life and work in the United States. He helped to found several expat organisations, including both the Jamaicans Benevolent Association and, in the 1930s, the Jamaica Progressive League. In 1917, the same year the JBA was founded, he joined the Socialist Party. The next year, he introduced Marcus Garvey to a New York-based printer and served briefly as one of the earliest editors of the *Negro World*. This range of political activity meant that when he attempted to return to his native Jamaica in 1941, he was interned for over a year by the British colonial authorities as a potential threat to the war effort. By 1946, as Jamaicans became increasingly aware of the hemispheric pull entwining their fate with that of the United States, Domingo employed his past experience and credentials to claim a space as interpreter of American politics and world affairs for his Jamaican compatriots.

Domingo’s formula of applying his knowledge of “American Negroes” to the Jamaican nationalist campaign relied heavily upon his resumé as an active participant in African American political life for over three decades. But more than this, his column asserted his intellectual authority as an expert on international communism and, in particular, the position of the Soviet Union in foreign affairs. His columns regularly addressed the differences between American economic imperialism and British political imperialism, suggesting that efforts to “span the sea” included not only the geography of the United States and Jamaica but also Europe and Africa; and that the “sea” between these groups contained ideological and cultural components as well. In other words, Domingo read postwar Jamaican national politics in the 1940s through the lens of interwar

transnational black radicalism and its relationship to the international communist movement. Indeed, as Margaret Stevens' work on Domingo argues, despite his physical base in New York in the 1920s and 1930s his politicization always circulated between Kingston and Harlem; reflecting a fluid and reciprocal process that prompts an array of questions about the interplay between black transnational radicalism and Bolshevism.

As an active member of the African Blood Brotherhood in 1920s Harlem, Domingo figures as one member of the cast of Minkah Makalani's book, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939*. In the period bracketed by the Bolshevik Revolution and the opening fire of the Second World War, Domingo joined a company of black activists (often of Caribbean origin) who engaged with organized Marxism, including: Hubert Harrison, Otto Huiswoud, Grace Campbell, Cyril Briggs, Claude McKay, Richard B. Moore, James Ford, George Padmore, Amy Ashwood Garvey, and C.L.R. James. Domingo's work in Jamaica in the 1940s is outside the parameters of Makalani's study. Yet I have elaborated on this here for one important reason: it cuts to the heart of the diverse geographical, ideological, and epistemological terrain of black radicalism which Makalani's impressive study seeks to elaborate. And Domingo's contribution to Jamaican politics in the 1940s provides just one example of how interwar black radicalism's international circuits directly informed the anti-colonial politics of not one region, movement, or historical moment, but many.

Caribbean entanglements with the United States have been drawn out in much more detail since Winston James's canonical and empirically rich study in 1999. Gerald Horne's prolific body of work has been integral here, inspiring a methodology that balances both Caribbean and American sources. Taken together, Horne's work speaks explicitly to the importance of labour movements, migration, and socialism that spanned the interwar and postwar period. Lara Putnam's recent book, *Radical Moves* (2013), helps to situate the work of communist-aligned radicals within a wider frame of debates about race and freedom that circulated between the Anglophone and Spanish circum-Caribbean, and the United States. In both Horne and Putnam's work, the Caribbean is more than a source for black radicalism's protagonists, played out on an American stage, but equally and reciprocally, a site where its deliberations took place.¹

We also know that the West Indian-United States circuit of black radical activity was not divorced from metropolitan Europe. And while the proliferation of scholarship on black "radicals" encompasses a seemingly wide (and, arguably, increasingly vague and unwieldy) spectrum of ideas and activity, scholarly consensus now seems to be that the connections between black political activity

¹ For a thoughtful interrogation of the direct impact of United States politics and presence in Trinidad in the 1930s and 1940s, see also Neptune (2007).

and organized Marxism stands as one of the most distinctive features of the interwar period. Mining the invaluable Moscow archives opened in the 1990s, a substantive body of historical work (Adi; McLellan; Pennybacker; Turner; Weiss) began to break down the previous tired dichotomy of black radicals as either “duped” into organized communism only to become disillusioned renegades or, even more hackneyed, the portrayal of black activists as opportunists who joined the communist movement purely for its organizational apparatus and then discarded it once this no longer proved useful.² *In the Cause of Freedom* is animated by the need to find a more comprehensive answer to fundamental questions: Why did some black radicals find the Comintern efficacious? And what, exactly, was the substance of their interaction?

Makalani’s frame for appreciating these questions has two main components. First, this is a work of intellectual history resolutely grounded in the ideas of the black men and women who were drawn to international Marxism in the interwar years. Makalani embraces the concept of “heresy”, applying a range of important theoretical scholarship as an analytic tool for taking seriously the habits of thought of these black activists. This approach allows us to recognize black radical engagement with Marxism without reducing the matter to a zero sum game; that is, rather than try to determine the “originary” or “true” source of thought, we should instead appreciate the concurrent engagement with both Marxism and black emancipatory responses to modernity’s racialist structures. From this angle, crucially, black radicals entered the politics of international Marxism via an already existing critical praxis and tradition that allowed them to challenge and expand the analysis of their contemporary Marxists. In Makalani’s words, “organized Marxism represented less the source and more the moment of their politics.”(5) Indeed, he argues that it was precisely the fluidity of their association with organized communism that allowed for the welding of an international circuit of intellectuals from Harlem, London, the Caribbean, and Africa.

Second, the book focuses on black radical institutions in Harlem and London, foregrounding the intellectual and organizational strategies of those who congregated around American organisations like the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) and the American Negro Labour Congress (ANLC), the Hamburg-based International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW), and finally

² We also eagerly anticipate publications from a number of PhD dissertations, including S. Ani Mukherji, (2010) “The Anticolonial Imagination: The Exilic Productions of American Radicalism in Interwar Moscow,” PhD dissertation, Brown University; Marc Goulding, (2012) “Vanguards of the New Africa: Black Radical Networks and Anti-Imperialism in the 1930s,” PhD dissertation, New York University; Margaret Stevens, (2010) “The Red International and the Black Caribbean: Transnational Radical Organisations in New York City, Mexico, and the West Indies, 1919-1939,” PhD dissertation, Brown University.

the London-based International African Service Bureau (IASB). Makalani seeks to identify a set of ideas and practices exhibited by the ABB in Harlem in the 1920s that were then reflected, two decades later and across the Atlantic, in the IASB in London.

By starting with a detailed archival excavation of the activity of the ABB, this book is able to move further than Winston James's groundbreaking work, which described the ABB as a grouping of individuals whose politics moved along a continuum of New Negro ideology (from black nationalism to orthodox socialism) that was ultimately "dissolved" into the CPUSA.³ Instead, the first chapters of *In the Cause of Freedom* provide a more detailed picture of ABB radicals' intricate relationship with the communist movement that was entwined with – but never fully swallowed by – organized communism. Chapter Three establishes how the Comintern came to be seen by black radicals in the United States as a viable institutional framework which could foster the internationalism they desired while simultaneously circumventing some of the blockages thrown up by the racist paternalism of national communist parties in the United States and Europe.

Importantly, the Comintern is neither deified here as the lofty harbinger of international brotherhood, nor castigated as an ignorant and imperious oligarch, which never truly offered black political activists an opportunity to explore their political visions. Rather, Moscow provided an opening for black radicals that contained its own distinct limitations. For example, Makalani astutely notes that just when the ABB disbanded and decided to organize themselves in a united front of American Negro labourers (rather than a broad racial alliance), the Comintern set up a framework that ordained leadership from among Moscow-educated black leaders – thus bypassing the insight of activists attune to the internal conflicts that had set up this particular configuration of black political organisation. The class and racial idiosyncracies of American national politics collided in this moment with the framework and strategies of an international institutional structure. How black radicals maneuvered the variant boundaries of these overlapping organisations is in many ways the heart of this book.

As the black radicals who had come together in the United States began to move closer to organized communism, the book attends to the currents of nativist thinking that sometimes pitted African-American radicals against their comrades who hailed from the Caribbean. This, in turn, had some influence on how individuals in the ABB and the ANLC theorized national revolution. For example, anti-Garvey rhetoric tended to focus on voting rights, citizenship, and state-sanctioned belonging. The nativist inflections of the anti-Garvey campaign highlight a defining problematic within transnational political arenas whereby

³ For an even more recent detailed treatment of the ABB see Zumoff (2015).

universalist demands for rights remain applicable only in national spaces. And in these debates it is possible to discern a precursor to the era of political decolonization in the late 1940s and 1950s: the ambiguous folding together – never fully theoretically worked out – of political self-determination as a national project and as proletarian struggle.

As the narrative moves across the Atlantic, by way of Moscow and Europe, the political evolution of Trinidad-born George Padmore serves as Makalani's physical and intellectual bridge between Harlem and London. And while the latter chapters help to explain the bridge between the ABB and the IASB, I want to offer a few other points of comparison. Ultimately, Makalani argues that both groupings displayed an "ideological ecumenicalism" (205) that "extended Marxist theory to discuss Africa, Asia, colonialism, racial oppression and fascism" and thus "challenged the inadequacies of organized Marxist formations." (228) But the other similarity between the ABB and the IASB is *how* they came to their Marxist positions independent of white left organisations. Just as C.L.R. James became the resident expert on Marxist theory in the Independent Labour Party (ILP) because of his own methodical and thorough reading of Marx and Engels – which he claimed far surpassed his white comrades – so the Harlem study groups and the People's Education Forum that were the grain of the ABB, were their own initiative.⁴ It is also important that Padmore's collaboration with the ILP developed from the need of financial and infrastructural support but also, equally, that by the late 1930s he could find much ideological agreement on the key issue of imperialism, growing war ferment, and administrative crimes in colonial territories. Compared with these glimpses of collaboration between black radicals and their white comrades, black intellectual production in the United States, covered in the first half of the book, seemed much more segregated.

I want to end with two final points that return to the operative space of black internationalism. As a result not only of the Italo-Abyssinian Crisis but also strikes in Rhodesia, the Gold Coast Cocoa Hold Up, and rumours that Britain and France might barter African colonies for German appeasement in the late 1930s, Africa became a crucial focus of the work of the IASB. But in my reading, *In the Cause of Freedom* overemphasizes the centrality of Africa in Padmore's and James's revolutionary thinking. The West Indies was not peripheral to them. Indeed, it was precisely at this moment that West Indian workers were demonstrating vanguard leadership in the realm of both anti-colonial revolt and in challenging historically structured racial binaries. The analysis here, I suspect, may be a result of relying too heavily upon C.L.R. James's personal recollections of the IASB and their work, which emphasized Africa as the key location of their revolutionary theory. James downplayed the considered and wide organizing by

⁴ For C.L.R. James's reading practices in London, see Hogsbjerg (2014).

the IASB and their affiliates around the Forster and Moyne Commissions, along with rallies in Trafalgar Square, resolutions and petitions in solidarity with striking Caribbean workers.

If the Caribbean labour revolts also play a diminished role as the book's narrative draws to a close, so Moscow slips from the scene. Makalani rightly acknowledges that Padmore was being fallacious when he claimed that he left the Comintern because the ITUCNW had been liquidated – it was not, and indeed Otto Huiswoud became the editor of the *Negro Worker*. But it is equally important to recognize that as London became an increasingly important node in the orbit of black radicalism, Moscow did not disappear. We have long known that prominent figures like Paul Robeson and Du Bois were inspired by Moscow. Indeed, by excavating artistic production in 1930s Moscow, Ani Mukherji (2012) brilliantly intensifies our appreciation of what the work of both Erik McDuffie (2011) and Kate Baldwin (2002) have grappled with: the fact that, in Mukherji's words, it was not simply material support but “material for the imagination that Moscow offered.” This terrain for imagination and inspiration proved increasingly fraught as the devastating reality of Stalin's purges became unavoidable.

Ultimately, then, Makalani's introductory argument remains a salient judgement: black radicalism must be understood as “something that took shape over time” and does not “assume a permanent form.” (14) The contribution of *In the Cause of Freedom* is to provide us with a model for how to theorise black radical thought using empirically grounded historical research in multiple locations. Together, we enlist in a collective enterprise not only to map geographically but, in doing so, discern the depths of black radical thought and its transregional valences.

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