Oliver C. Cox on Caste, Class and Race:

Theoretical and Policy Implications for a Color Blind Society[1]

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The Supreme Court decision Brown v. Board of Education is celebrating its 50th anniversary at this time. This landmark case in 1954 resulted in a successful assault on Jim Crow laws which had established separate but equal accommodations for blacks and whites coming out of an 1896 Supreme Court decision in Plessy v. Ferguson. This successful challenge was mounted by a cadre of young lawyers trained by Charles Hamilton Houston at Howard University, led by Thurgood Marshall. One of the legacies of Brown has been the very difficult efforts to enforce it (Ogletree 2004; Patterson 2001). Through it all the question about how race has come to be so important in the fabric of this society has brought forth many explanations.

My aim in this presentation is to talk initially about Dr. Oliver C. Cox, who in the course of his life (8/24/01-9/4/74) consistently challenged the prevailing views of race relations in the United States and in so doing has been labeled a Marxist and marginalized for his radical views—which for all intents and purposes were right on point though not palatable for many.

Oliver Cromwell Cox was born in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, the son of Virginia Blake and William Raphael Cox. For the most part his family was well-to-do. Herbert Hunter indicates that, "in Trinidad Cox was far removed from the racial discrimination and hostility that characterized race relations in the United States, and in addition had experienced living in a country where whites were a minority and considered outsiders" (xviii).

There were no formal or legal constraints or a rigidly enforced color lines in Trinidad, as there were in the United States. As Hunter puts it, "There were opportunities for Trinidadians who had the appropriate skin color, wealth, education, and/or family status—it was the interplay among these factors that set the pattern for power and privilege…" (xviii).

At the behest of his father, Oliver, like his (5) brothers and (3) sisters, went to the U.S. to further his education. In the fall of 1927 he entered Northwestern University to study law, receiving his degree in 1929. Polio wrecked his plans to return to Trinidad to become a lawyer. In 1930 he entered the Economics Department at the University of Chicago, where he later switched to sociology because his teachers could not adequately explain the conditions leading to the Great Depression, nor the changes that came with it (xx). At Chicago Cox studied with William Ogburn, and Herbert Blumer. He wrote his dissertation on "Factors Affecting the Marital Status of Negroes in the United States." He received his doctorate in sociology in August 1938 at age 37.

In the course of his studies Cox was greatly influenced by Karl Marx. Although he denied being a Marxist—in the

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traditional sense—he effectively wrote from a power-conflict (or Marxist class analysis) approach like W. E. B. Du Bois. Regarding race relations, Cox emphasized the role of the capitalist class—the owners of the means of production who bought the labor-power of others—in the exploitation of slaves. In his view the slave trade was "a way of recruiting labor for the purpose of exploiting the great natural resources of America." In Cox' view the color of the Africans was secondary. The choice to use Africans was made "simply because they were the best workers to be found for the heavy labor in the mines and plantations across the Atlantic…" The search for a source of cheap labor by a profit-oriented capitalist class led to, in Cox' view, a system of racial subordination. Racial prejudice developed later as an ideology rationalizing the economic subordination of African Americans.

His views clashed with the Caste School or perspective which had been put forth at the time by W. Lloyd Warner and Allison Davis. According to this perspective the position of African-Americans was seen as distinctively different from that of other racial or ethnic groups. In their view after the Civil War a new social system, a caste system replaced the slavery system of the south. They offered the concept of caste, not implying that the structure of race relations in the U.S. was exactly like the caste system in India, but that the prohibition of intermarriage and the other aspects of racial etiquette in the south between blacks and whites were caste-like. Their use of caste to explain race relations in the south as an ideal type did not sit well with Cox. He attacked their perspective by contrasting the aspects of how caste was manifested in India with aspects of the status of whites and blacks in the south. He indicated that the Indian Caste System was a powerful form of social organization which could go on indefinitely as it did not have or foster any group antagonisms, however he went on to say that the social aims and purposes of whites and blacks in the south were irreconcilably opposed.

What Oliver C. Cox tried to accomplish speaks to the theme of this conference regarding the liberating aspects of social theory. Myra Bergman Ramos, in her summary of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1974), cited two points which are the focus of my presentation:

1. Culture of Silence. This concept indicates that "any person, however ignorant or submerged in the 'culture of silence,' can look critically at his or her world through a process of dialogue with others, and can gradually come to perceive his personal and social reality, think about it, and take action in regard to it" (Ramos 1974). Cox reflected on and fought against imprecise concepts and models of race that served to cloud, not elucidate, the problem of race relations, and the effects of economics and political class as important contributing factors.

2. The nature of the oppressor consciousness. This consciousness "tends to transform everything around it into an object of its domination. The earth, property, production, people's creations, the people themselves, time…; everything comes to be viewed as objects at the disposal of their (in this case the capitalist class) purchasing power. The main thing becomes to have more, always more. In this materialistic concept of culture, 'to be is to have and to be the class of the 'haves.' Of course they blind themselves to all this. 'If others do not have more, it is because they are incompetent and lazy… Because they are 'ungrateful' and 'envious,' they are seen as potential enemies.' Often this desire for complete domination includes a sadistic impulse" (Ramos 1974). This point seems especially poignant given the historical view we now have of America's response to those who have been perceived as "different" and and were subsequently marginalized as the "other" while the U.S. expanded and grew to the benefit of a relative few. Cox in utilizing Marxian based Conflict Theory sought to relate the development of a repressive slave system as being driven by the demands associated with capitalist political economy and greed. The need to hold onto political power when slavery was no longer economically feasible led to other machinations that served to control the Black population through enforced institutional and social segregation.

Cox's analysis did much to alienate him from many in academe particularly at the Chicago School. Several commentators have offered that during the late forties and fifties it was not good for one to be even slightly connected with Marxism which in the minds of many Americans was indistinguishable from Communism. However it is also important to note that other activists, scholars and social thinkers like Du Bois, Paul Robeson, and Richard Wright, who came to see the struggles of African-Americans as being linked to the political class struggle of others who had been similarly exploited, also paid a price for embracing socialism if not Marxism, in an effort to silence them.

Throughout the remainder of his career Oliver Cox focused on a tight analysis of capitalism as the reason for intergroup hostility. His analysis of Capitalism as a political economy which seeks expanding markets and cheap labor could be applied to present day concerns for globalization. But due to the controversial nature of his writing at that time he was not given his due despite his prolific scholarship. Oliver Cox died on September 4th, 1974.

A Color Blind Society

The work of individuals like Cox, Du Bois and presently William Julius Wilson have set the stage for a better understanding of the economic, structural and environmental forces that have shaped race relations in the U.S. With race still a major concern how shall society proceed in the new millennium? The census folks since 1996, and just recently (three weeks ago), have talked about the demographic re-shaping of the American society with regards to its racial and ethnic composition by year 2050, where whites will comprise just about 50% of the population.

In the debate on race in the United States, there have been several movements one of which enables the recognition and retention of ethnic traits, customs and values of the minority group and places them on par with those in the mainstream. The most recent idea or movement is that of multiculturalism or multi-cultural diversity. It is regarded as an offspring of the notion of Cultural Pluralism which was first used by Horace Kallen. Kallen (1882-1974) spoke out against the process of Americanization, or assimilation, which all newcomers from Europe experienced—which expecting them to leave behind all aspects of their former culture as they became Americans. This expectation that new immigrants comply with this notion of "Anglo-Conformity" was advocated by protestant nativists, those born here who then selectively opposed or sought to restrain the immigration of other groups. Their concern was the preservation of their distinctive way of life and the institutions that served to protect it (Mclemore 2001: 50-113).

During the 1920s Kallen used the term cultural pluralism to put forward the view that each ethnic group has the right to retain distinctive aspects of its heritage and not assimilate to the point where those distinctive traits are subsumed into the mainstream. The present day concept of multiculturalism (multi-cultural diversity) is a source of fear to some, particularly because it has co-occurred with the letting into the country groups that are perceived to be a danger to the present way of life of the majority—that distinctive way of life which nativists had long sought to protect as the country expanded at the expense of Native Americans and Mexicans. The concern here is on many levels. But the underlying concern and tension here is that the U.S. is in danger of no longer being a white man's country. This is cause for concern by many who feel that they have been sold out by political leaders who have allowed these dangerous classes to immigrate. This is the latest in the series of concerns about others coming here, yet it is the relaxation of the former anglo-standard which required newcomers to assimilate the best they could and to eventually amalgamate into the mainstream.

Cultural pluralism has to an extent buffered newcomers from having to become Americanized as the immigrants once did. With a Declaration of Independence which declares that all men are created equal, and a Constitution which protects the minority from the majority, the face of American institutions may change in order to accomodate the needs and values of the newcomers who do not directly challenge the American way of life but will surely influence the flavor of how things are done.

The issue of a multi-culturally diverse United States of America considers that there are and have been for some time other voices that make up this social tapestry. As the critical mass of various groups grows they are requiring that the discussion of inequality, discrimination, prejudice, poverty not be a white-black discussion (Anderson and Byrne 2004; Jaimes 1992; Wu 2002). Given the desire to be included in the discussion on race and inequality and with increasing acrimony regarding race based policies to address the history of racism and discrimination in this country, there is pressure to move beyond old ways of thinking on these issues. William Julius Wilson, who has written about the declining significance of race and has focused on the increasing importance of class, has suggested in his book, *The Bridge Over the Racial Divide* (1999), that there needs to be the formation of new coalitions among groups on the basis of class, in part to address the heated feelings about race-based policies for redressing of past discrimination, and in part to recognize that working class and poor Whites have also been exploited and left out in great measure as well. It is in this interesting moment that we need to consider whether the need to form class coalitions refer to political class or social class. Here is where Cox's political class analysis becomes very important. For it is the tension between the capitalist class and the laboring class that is at issue and not race—though race has historically been used to drive a wedge between poor and working class Blacks and Whites by the capitalist class.

Before closing I would like to mention another movement in the U.S. which calls for the abandonment of any notions of race in the spirit of being color blind to race. Ward Connerly, a regent in the Univ. of California system, was very instrumental in striking down affirmative action in the college and university admissions process in his state. He recently advocated taking away any requirement for checking the little boxes identifying one's racial makeup. This effort however was overturned.

Those who have been in positions of power might give voice to and embrace a policy of color blindness, but Cox

and others enable us to look behind that façade to see that if fundamental changes do not take place between those who have the power to buy and exploit the labor of others and those who have to sell their labor-power at the risk of being exploited then nothing has really changed. The basis for the status quo remains and power would still remain in the hands of those who impose the White anglo-standard in terms of institutions, opportunities, and life chances, and this is what Cox argued. He not only challenged the powers to be precise in how they used terms like caste, but also to be clear about the distinction between social and political class. Being clear about these distinctions helps move the discussion of race away from the issue of morality. As Cox states,

> If the 'race problem' in the United States is preeminently a moral question, it must naturally be resolved by moral means, and this conclusion is precisely the social illusion which the ruling class has constantly sought to produce (Cox 2000).

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