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Historical Knowledge as Civic Obligation A Comment on McCarthy

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“Historical unconsciousness of institutional racism in the past feeds unconscious neoracism in the present,” argues Thomas McCarthy—speaking specifically of the United States (2009, 89). Similarly, historical unconsciousness of the West’s imperial domination and exploitation of nonwhite peoples from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries feeds disavowed neoimperialism in the present. McCarthy’s *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* is an impassioned plea for Americans and Westerners to develop greater historical consciousness at the national and global levels. We must learn to see ourselves (partly) as creatures of historical process—as individuals whose opportunities for freedom and self-development are (largely) historically pre-determined. The

reward, however, is an enhanced ability to practice freedom—for historical consciousness makes us more intelligent co-creators of the present and future.

Calls for greater historical consciousness are commonplace in critical race theory, but what sets McCarthy’s work apart is his detailed specification of how historical understanding can illuminate contemporary political phenomena. The most impressive example of this specification is his genealogy of cultural racism. In both the introduction and Chapter 3, McCarthy exposes the contemporary American tendency to explain racial inequality as resulting from nonwhite behavior dysfunction as the historical and ideological offspring of biological racism:

The discourses in the US about ‘the culture of poverty’ in the 1960s and 1970s, and about the ‘socially dysfunctional behavior’ of the ‘underclass’ since the 1980s . . . are instances of a general pattern of ethnoracial thinking in social science and social policy. . . . It is, of course, a much debated question whether this shift from biology to culture amounts to the end of racism or to the rise of a new modality. . . . [F]rom the perspective of critical theory, to regard it as the end of racism is not only to ignore the historical continuity of these discourses with classical racist ideologies . . . it is also to occlude the basic structural similarities cultural racism bears to biological racism. . . . Perhaps the most striking continuity, however, is that this variant logic is generally applied to *the same basic subdivisions of humanity that were socially constructed in and through classical racism* (10-11—emphasis in original; cf. 86-87).

Perceiving the essential continuity between biological and cultural racism requires the historical long view: the discourse of cultural racism must be set against the background of its

antecedents. Only then can we see “the basic structural similarities” between them and appreciate their identical function: to justify racial inequality and discourage the impulse to eliminate it.

McCarthy is equally astute in his explanation of the importance of historical consciousness in the analysis of global inequality:

Centuries of expropriation, extermination, enslavement, and empire, which were part and parcel of the rise of capitalism in the West, left its beneficiaries with vastly more power than its victims to set the ground rules of postcolonial global order. The laws and conventions, treaties and organizations, procedures and institutions that constitute this order tend to systematically advantage the already advantaged and disadvantage the already disadvantaged (236).

The historical long view dramatically exposes the glib self-congratulation inhering in the West’s use of the idea of “dysfunctional cultural values” to explain non-Western “underdevelopment” (11). McCarthy’s book recurrently poses a penetrating question: How can the white West so nonchalantly assume it has purged itself of white supremacy when its political behavior still reinforces the same basic structure of white power / nonwhite powerlessness that characterized overtly white supremacist regimes?¹ What justifies the assumption that mid-twentieth-century American civil rights gains and formal African and Asian decolonization constitutes the end of white supremacist history, the moral catharsis that reestablishes American and Western innocence? The presumption, McCarthy argues, should be essential continuity rather than seismic change. The burden of proof should be on white Americans and the white West to show themselves divested of white supremacy, rather

than on nonwhite Americans and the nonwhite non-West to show that they still suffer from white supremacy’s systemic effects. Shifting the burden of proof will require us to reimagine “[e]xploitation, expropriation, dispossession, slavery, colonialism, and imperialism” as “central mechanisms” of American and Western historical development rather than as “accidental byproducts” (226). Making this imaginative shift stick will require citizens to immerse themselves in history from the nonwhite point of view.

For this reason, I read McCarthy as making historical knowledge a robust obligation of American and global citizenship.² I say historical *knowledge* rather than the more general historical *consciousness* because it seems to me that there are some strong substantive parameters on the type of history McCarthy wants citizens to learn. First, McCarthy wants Americans and Westerners to face up to the fact that our historical understanding is strongly differentiated by subject position. How history looks from the perspective of white and Western affluence differs markedly from how it looks from the perspective of nonwhite and non-Western poverty. Neither side has a complete view of history, though I suspect that McCarthy sympathizes with standpoint theorists who claim that the views of the exploited and oppressed penetrate deeper into reality. Second, McCarthy wants the historically privileged to reread history from the perspective of the historically oppressed. This re-reading should be more than exposure to tales of woe: the historically privileged must imagine how experiences of exploitation, expropriation, dispossession, slavery, and imperialism frustrated—often annihilated—the attempts of human agents to practice freedom and realize their own visions of the good. Only then will the gravity of the injustice and loss, and the need for political atonement, fully register.³ Third, citizens must synthesize new local and national histories into a systemic understanding of modernity as fundamentally constituted by

white supremacy. This understanding must be more than abstract: it requires a grasp of the interconnections between the birth of the nation-state, the conquest of the Americas, the rise of Atlantic slavery, the evolution of Western capitalism, the economics of resource extraction, and the emergence of neoracist and neocolonial regimes in the aftermath of formal emancipation and decolonization.

McCarthy captures the tight connection between historical knowledge and political judgment when he urges his fellow citizens of the United States and the West to “become more fully aware of the barbarism at the heart of our own civilizing process”:

In the wake of the horrors associated with World War II, Europeans seem to have learned some of these lessons, as their movement toward the postnational constellation of the European Union suggests. But the United States, spared the wartime devastation of its homeland and emerging as the only remaining great power, has, it seems, yet to learn most of them, as the Vietnam and Iraq invasions indicate. Together with our anomalous policies on trade, development, energy, environment, ‘preemption,’ unilateralism, and a host of other things, they suggest that national false consciousness and self-righteousness have scarcely abated (231-232).

McCarthy here advances Lawrie Balfour’s and George Shulman’s claim that “American innocence” is not just a literary motif, but a historically entrenched form of political subjectivity whose consequences are real and deadly (Balfour 2001; Shulman 2008). The question he raises indirectly, however, is whether America must experience self-destruction on the scale of World War II and the Holocaust before critical historical consciousness can take hold.

To this last question, McCarthy wants to say no. We “cannot deny the evident advance of human learning in numerous domains and the enhancement of our capacity to cope with a variety of problems” (233).⁴ Here I want to press McCarthy. I am not as sure that vanquishing innocence—in the American case at least—is a “rational hope.” “Americans, unhappily, have the most remarkable ability to alchemize all bitter truths into an innocuous but piquant confection and to transform their moral contradictions, or public discussion of such contradictions, into a proud decoration,” observed James Baldwin ([1955] 1998, 24). The recent erection of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial on the National Mall illustrates Baldwin’s claim. In one respect, the nation’s official tribute to King is a sign of moral progress. America has officially embraced one of its sternest critics as a hero. But which King is the nation embracing? The selection of King quotations on the inscription wall suggests a sanitized version, depleted of substantive critique. Though one of the quotations records his opposition to the Vietnam War—“I oppose the war in Vietnam because I love America”—even it is enveloped in patriotic affirmation. Most others, shorn of original context, do not rise above cliché: “I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits”; “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”; “True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice” (Wikipedia 2011). Absent are King’s calls for a national policy of full employment and a guaranteed annual income (King [1967b] 1986, 247). Absent also are his more searing indictments of Western capitalism: “When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered” (King [1967a] 1986, 240). Even the official review from the *Washington Post*—hardly a bastion of critical theory—remarked that “the memorial is focused on the anodyne, pre-1965 King, the man

remembered as a saintly hero of civil rights, not an anti-war goad to the national conscience whose calls for social and economic justice would be considered rank socialism in today's political climate" (Kennicott 2011). The King memorial validates Baldwin's thesis that Americans are uncanny in their ability to fold any critical discussion of history into a story of self-redemption. The King memorial gives comfort to proponents of inexorable moral progress, prominently featuring his statement (again shorn of context) that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice" (Wikipedia 2011).

My critique of McCarthy's suggestion that the development of critical historical consciousness among the American public is a "rational hope" is not meant to discourage his or anyone else's efforts to cultivate such consciousness. I simply wish to reframe the object's pursuit in more accurate terms: as one of what Cornel West calls "tragicomic hope" (West 2004). Critical public historical consciousness is a "tragicomic hope" because the historical record counsels strongly against belief in the possibility of its achievement. But surrendering to belief in its impossibility is not an option for any self-respecting person—for such surrender is tantamount to cooperation with history's amorality and others' immorality. The self-respecting student of history therefore faces the absurd situation—the tragicomic situation—of having to fight for a critical public historical consciousness her better judgment tells her is—if not impossible—highly improbable. Yet she still feels compelled to fight, against great odds. The hope animating this fight is not strictly rational. Its deeper source is supra-rational love of justice, whose still deeper source is wonder and awe at human beauty and equality.⁵ This, I think, is a better way to understand the motivation behind the quest for critical public historical consciousness. Given McCarthy's demanding standard of critical public historical consciousness—widespread historical inquiry by citizens, the practice of multiple perspectivism, and the

synthesis of their outputs into a systemic understanding of political, cultural, and economic modernity—the quest for its achievement requires far more than rational assessment for motivational force; it requires a leap of faith. With McCarthy, I take this leap (Turner 2012). Let us be clear-eyed about its length.

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¹ The term "white West," of course, vastly oversimplifies. My use of it—and of other equally unsatisfactory shorthands—is meant simply to map racialized spaces writ large, but at the obvious cost of obscuring those spaces' internal heterogeneity.

² Global citizenship refers to individual membership in a world network of societies, to the obligations of social reciprocity attending such membership, and to the right to expect redress for violations for reciprocity. No coercive authority exists to enforce norms of global citizenship; their force derives solely from the reasoning of agents committed to fairness and equality.

³ This exercise in historical study and imagination will also help privileged citizens recognize the complex subjectivities of the oppressed—complex subjectivities historically occluded by American and Western triumphalist narratives.

⁴ Thoreau might respond, "improved means to an unimproved end" ([1854] 2004, 52).

⁵ For helpful consideration of the sources of respect for human dignity and equality, see Kateb [2000] 2006, esp. 142-147, and Kateb 2011.