



Concepts of Cabralism: On Cabral's Intellectual Contributions

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Abstract

This article evaluates Reiland Rabaka's book, *Concepts of Cabralism: Amilcar Cabral and Africana Critical Theory*. In the context of calls for knowledge 'decolonisation' on the African continent, the book is relevant and important for a variety of reasons. In the first instance, Rabaka traces the genealogy of Amilcar Cabral's intellectual and political thought to leading figures of the Negritude Movement such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor, and then to Frantz Fanon. In doing so, Rabaka argues that, unlike other revolutionaries, Cabral avoided an uncritical regurgitation of orthodox Marxism. Instead, Cabral studied the concrete conditions of his locale not only to lead the liberation struggles of his people, but also to enrich revolutionary theory. In this regard, he was able to critique and, where necessary, dispense with some of the taken-for-granted categories of orthodox Marxism. Ultimately, Rabaka sees Cabral not only as a 'revolutionary nationalist' and 'revolutionary humanist', but also as a critical theorist. Consequently, he suggests that Cabral should be read as contributing to 'Africana critical theory'. This article will take up each of these issues in its proper course.

Keywords: Africana critical theory; Amilcar Cabral; Aime Césaire; Frantz Fanon; Negritude; Return; Léopold Sédar Senghor

Résumé

Cet article évalue le livre de Reiland Rabaka, *Concepts of Cabralism: Amilcar Cabral and Africana Critical Theory*. Dans le contexte d'appels à la « décolonisation des connaissances » sur le continent africain, le livre est pertinent et important pour diverses raisons. En premier lieu, Rabaka retrace la généalogie de la pensée intellectuelle et politique d'Amilcar Cabral à des personnalités du Mouvement de la négritude, telles qu'Aimé

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Césaire et Léopold Sédar Senghor, puis à Frantz Fanon. Ce faisant, Rabaka soutient que, contrairement aux autres révolutionnaires, Cabral a évité une régurgitation sans critique du marxisme orthodoxe. Au lieu de cela, Cabral a étudié les conditions concrètes dans son pays, non seulement pour mener les luttes de libération de son peuple, mais aussi pour enrichir la théorie révolutionnaire. À cet égard, il a pu critiquer et, le cas échéant, se passer de catégories considérées comme acquises du marxisme orthodoxe. En fin de compte, Rabaka considère Cabral non seulement comme un « nationaliste révolutionnaire » et un « humaniste révolutionnaire », mais aussi comme un théoricien critique. Par conséquent, il suggère de considérer Cabral comme une contribution à la « théorie critique d'Africana ». Cet article abordera chacune de ces questions en son temps.

Mots-clés : théorie critique d'Africana ; Amilcar Cabral ; Aimé Césaire ; Frantz Fanon ; Négritude ; retour ; Léopold Sédar Senghor

Introduction

Reiland Rabaka argues that there are five distinct stages of Cabral studies. The first stage relates to studies of Cabral's critical theory in the last decade of his life – from 1962 to 1972 (see Chaliand 1969; Davidson 1964, 1969; Magubane 1971; Pinto 1972; Zartman 1964, 1969). The second stage relates to posthumous biographical studies on Cabral (de Braganca 1976; Nikanorov 1973; Vieira 1976). These studies centre on his life, intellectual growth and revolutionary praxis in the context of 'historicity' and 'cultural specificity' of Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau. These biographical studies, Rabaka argues, set the tone for subsequent stages of Cabral studies which interweave his life with 'makeshift multidisciplinary' discussions of his thought and influence on theories and praxes of his time, viz. African nationalism, African socialism, Marxism and Leninism. The third stage of Cabral studies focusses on his work on social theory and political praxis. These studies aim to show the relevance of his ideas to the social sciences (see Chabal 1980, 1983; Dadoo 1973; Davidson 1981, 1984; Ignatiev 1984, 1990; Magubane 1983; Nyang 1975, 1976; Nzongola-Ntalaja 1984; Rahmato 1982).

The fourth stage of Cabral studies centres on his contribution to African literature and what is known as the 'African Renaissance' (see Hamilton 1979; Moser 1978; Perkins 1976; Vambe and Zegeye 2006, 2008; Vambe 2010). In this sense, Rabaka suggests, Cabral can be located 'within the *African liberation leader-poet-politico* paradigm' (2014: 11, emphasis in original). Rabaka does not offer to explain this paradigm. One surmises, however, that he likens Cabral to African leaders such as Leopold Senghor and Agostino Neto. The fifth stage of Cabral studies turns on developing

Africana studies generally, and Africana philosophy specifically (see Abdullah 2006; Birmingham 1995; Jinadu 1978; Manji and Fletcher 2013; Serequeberhan 2004). The fifth stage is concerned with using Cabral's ideas to develop the growing Africana studies rather than 'Cabral studies' as such. Rabaka contends: 'A core characteristic of the works within the fifth stage of Cabral studies is that even books or articles where Cabral's name is prominent in the title, the overarching intellectual agenda is essentially aimed at contributing to "African studies", in the most general albeit critical sense of the term' (2014: 11-12). Rabaka confesses that his unique field of study, 'Africana critical theory', is not only rooted in, but actually grows out of, the fifth stage of Cabral studies. This notwithstanding, Rabaka feels that his work is 'distinguished' from the aforementioned five stages of Cabral studies. According to him, his study is the first to engage Cabral's ideas, 'consciously', in relation to Africana critical theory. Logically, Rabaka's study has to be distinguished from others because he is in any case the first to speak of a field of study called 'Africana critical theory' rather than Africana studies or Africana philosophy.

It should be said that this article owes its title to Rabaka's book, *Concepts of Cabralism: Amilcar Cabral and Africana Critical Theory* (2014). In the book, Rabaka not only follows the unit of Cabral's thought, but also attempts to deepen and develop the 'Africana tradition of critical theory' or Africana critical theory. It is an excellent book for which Rabaka deserves all the credit. The article engages Rabaka's arguments in the order in which he presents them in his book. As such, this article is organised along three main parts – each of which follows his arguments such as they occur in the three main sections of the book. Accordingly, the first section of the article deals with the philosophical foundations of Cabral's critical theory. The second section addresses Cabral's critical theory and revolutionary praxis. The remainder of the article remarks on the notion of Africana tradition of critical theory or Africana critical theory.

The Philosophical Foundations of Cabral's Critical Theory

Rabaka's study 'identifies and analyses Cabral's contributions to the deconstruction and reconstruction of Africana studies, radical politics, and critical social theory in the interests of the wretched of the earth of the twentyfirst century' (2014: 12). Rabaka sees his work as engaged in a critical dialogue with Cabral. In the main, the book 'keeps with Cabral's own predilection for connecting critical theory to revolutionary praxis by utilizing his thought and texts as paradigms and points of departure to deepen and further develop the Africana tradition of critical theory' (2014: 12). Rabaka

says he has always been bothered by social scientists' tendency to downplay Cabral's contribution to Africana studies. He is also irked by a related tendency to render Africana studies invisible. Having put his cards on the table, he is quick to point out that in declaring his position, he is not in any way engaged in what Lewis R. Gordon (2006) calls 'disciplinary decadence'. Gordon observes: '*Disciplinary decadence* is the ontologizing or reification of a discipline. In such an attitude, we treat our discipline as though it was never born and has always existed and will never change or, in some cases, die' (2006: 4-5, emphasis in original). Rabaka's attempt, in the light of Gordon's warning, is to build a case for 'knowledge which *transgresses, transcends, and transverses* disciplines or specific fields of scholarly inquiry' (2014: 13, emphasis in original). Rabaka argues that refusal to credit transdisciplinary knowledge is indicative of 'epistemic closure'. Rabaka's use of this concept seems to differ from Gordon's understanding of the same (see Gordon 1998, 2000). Gordon uses the concept to refer to those instances in which white social scientists limit black intellectuals to essentialised biographical narratives, as against engaging the substance of their ideas. An example of this would be an excessive focus on Frantz Fanon's or WEB Du Bois' life experiences rather than their ideas. In this way, rather than being intellectuals who produced knowledge they would be known for providing experience.

Against decadent disciplinary approaches, Rabaka argues that he provides 'a more philosophically flexible and epistemically open *human scientific* (re) interpretation' of Cabral's ideas (2014: 14, emphasis in original). It is not immediately clear how this differs from other human or social scientific writings on Cabral – particularly the fifth stage of Cabral studies. Rabaka has set before himself a very difficult task, the outcome of which might be much more difficult than he is willing to admit. At any rate, what Rabaka wishes to do is to 'circumvent the very tired tendency to read or, rather, misread Cabral in reductive disciplinary terms where his thought is validated and legitimated only insofar as it can be roguishly reframed and/or forced to fit into the arbitrary and artificial academic confines of this or that decadent discipline' (2014: 14). He adds that on his proposed schema, 'it is foolhardy and completely fallacious to criticise or condemn a theorist because his or her ideas (and/or actions) do not fit nicely and neatly into the, again, arbitrary and artificial academic categories and confines of one's respective (or, rather, *irrespective*) decadent discipline' (Rabaka 2014: 14, emphasis in original).

Rabaka argues that Cabral was not simply a 'military strategist', a 'philosopher' or a 'revolutionary', but an 'organic intellectual activist'. Quite correctly, he argues that Cabral's ideas are as important today as they were

when he was alive. In fact, Rabaka argues that Cabral's 'are more relevant now than they were during his lifetime' (2014: 15). Perhaps what is most important about Rabaka's claim is its sense of urgency and call to action. After all, Rabaka sees his work as engaged in a struggle against 'overlapping, interlocking and intersecting systems of violence, exploitation and oppression in the guileful guises of racism and colonialism as well' (2014: 15). It is because of these scourges in our societies that a return to Cabral's ideas becomes important. Rabaka observes that 'Cabral's thoughts and texts and intensely emphasises that Africana studies' distinct *transdisciplinary human scientific research methods and modes of analysis* may have or, rather, indeed, does have much to offer the, as of late, frequently stunted field of Cabral studies' (2014: 15, emphasis in original). In engaging Cabral's ideas, Rabaka first traces Cabral's intellectual genealogy (or 'discursive points of departure') to the Negritude Movement and Frantz Fanon, respectively.

In engaging Cabral's ideas, Rabaka also sets out deliberately to deconstruct conceptions of human science which have come to consolidate in the academy. By 'human sciences', he refers to 'the systematic, critical study and interpretation of the thought, behaviour, constructs and products created by, and/or associated with human beings' (2014: 17, emphasis in original). On the basis of this conception, he builds on the works of various thinkers and seeks to go beyond them in order 'to consciously include the wretched of the earth's (especially, classical and contemporary, continental and diasporan African) contributions to the human sciences' (Rabaka 2014: 27 endnote 14). Rabaka has rather lofty and noble ideals in that he seeks to:

...deconstruct and reconstruct and, in a sense, synthesize the human sciences and Africana studies, and ultimately assert that Africana studies has epistemologically matured to the point where it needs to be conceived of as nothing other than a transdisciplinary human science. To continue to speak or write of Africana studies as a 'discipline' or, as I have in my previous works, as an 'interdisciplinary' or 'transdisciplinary' discipline, simply does not do justice to the new kinds, and innovative combinations of knowledge that are more and more frequently emerging from its various fields and subfields of critical inquiry. (2014: 27 endnote 14, emphasis in original)

His conception of 'human sciences' includes 'non-traditional' 'disciplines' or fields of enquiry such as 'racial studies', 'cultural studies' etc. Rabaka may be inadvertently reinventing the wheel here. These disciplines (if that is what they are) are usually included in the social sciences or human sciences. It is not clear why they deserve a special mention in Rabaka's new 'human science'. Methodologically, Rabaka's 'human sciences identify and analyze, as well as compare and contrast, aspects of past and present human life-worlds

and life-struggles in order to critically comprehend human phenomena and, most importantly, to improve the prospects of the human condition' (2014: 17–18). Appropriately, Rabaka's human science endeavours to provide an informed understanding of human existence and lived experiences. Surely this task cannot be unique to Rabaka's conception of the human sciences. It would be uncharitable, however, to undermine his project by simply questioning its novelty as against its substance.

Rabaka goes on to argue that what distinguishes Cabral from Du Bois and Fanon, respectively, is not only his ability to identify problems confronting the damned of the earth, but also his ability to offer 'solutions' to sociopolitical problems. Rabaka says this 'irrefutably distinguishes' Cabral from the two thinkers. This is a controversial remark at best. It is one thing to say Cabral succeeded in actualizing his ideas through revolutionary work, in ways that Du Bois and Fanon did not. But it is quite another to imply that the latter two did not offer solutions. In an attempt to validate his claim, Rabaka says: 'The wide-range and wide reach, the sheer scope and high level of commitment of Cabral's radical politics and critical social theory is often simultaneously awe-inspiring and overwhelming' (2014: 19). Rabaka sees Cabral's ideas as transdisciplinary insofar as they cut across the social sciences. Moreover, such critical theories as Cabral developed, were rooted in his commitment to liberate the exploited and the oppressed. Rabaka goes on to argue that Africana studies has overlooked Cabral's discourse on 'revolutionary decolonization' and 're-Africanisation' 'in favor of his contributions to political theory, sociology, Marxism, Pan-Africanism, and African nationalism' (2014: 20). The validity of this argument is in doubt. Does Pan-Africanism, for example, preclude revolutionary decolonisation and re-Africanisation? If so, what then is it all about if not revolutionary decolonisation and re-Africanisation? Rabaka seeks to synthesise what he calls 'Cabral's critical theory of human science' with Africana studies. He does this in the hope that it would lead to '*a form of human studies incorrigibly obsessed with eradicating the wretchedness of the wretched of the earth and indefatigably geared toward the ultimate goal of deepening and developing the Africana tradition of critical theory*' (Rabaka 2014: 21, emphasis in original).

Having outlined the problematic and its matrix, Rabaka attempts to situate Cabral in the intellectual and political tradition that shaped his thoughts, i.e. the Negritude Movement and Fanon. He goes farther than that and argues that in order to understand the Negritude Movement, one has to contend with the Harlem Renaissance. To see the link between the Negritude Movement and the Harlem Renaissance, one must remember that the latter waned in the wake of the Great Depression of the 1930s. As

a result of the declining economic fortunes and cultural scene in the US, Africans in the diaspora and those on the continent alike, increasingly made their way to Paris instead of Harlem, New York. Against this background, Rabaka is able to conclude, following Abiola Irele (1986), that the Paris intellectual and political scene gave birth to the critical concept of Negritude. Rabaka refers to Negritude theorists as ‘guerrilla intellectuals’ who were ‘able to synthesize a wide range of black and white radical perspectives’ (2014: 32). These intellectuals earn the label ‘guerrilla intellectuals’ because they read any text that would equip them intellectually and politically to advance their struggle against racism, colonialism and capitalism. They read anything and everything from Du Bois to CLR James, from Jean-Paul Sartre to Andre Breton and many others. Rabaka’s judgment is that, insofar as the Negritude Movement was the ‘first modern black aesthetic movement’ that sought spiritual and cultural redemption of the continental and diasporan Africans, it was unique. Accordingly, this movement sought to redefine and radicalise the black aesthetic by bringing different political and intellectual strands to bear on black art. As is known, some of the best exponents of the Negritude philosophy were Aime Cesaire and Leopold Senghor, respectively. To this duo, Rabaka adds Jean-Paul Sartre. As a result, he speaks not only of ‘Cesairean Negritude’ and ‘Senghorian Negritude’, but also of ‘Sartrean Negritude’.

Before discussing the Negritude movement in detail, Rabaka offers a prelude in the form of a discussion of the Harlem Renaissance. The latter was itself preceded by the ‘New Negro Movement’ which was made up of African-American and Caribbean cultural icons. The New Negroes were calling for Pan-African unity. Rabaka argues that if one fails to acknowledge the role of the New Negro Movement and the Harlem Renaissance, one would not be able to understand the roots of the Negritude Movement and subsequent black radical intellectual traditions. He argues that the Harlem Renaissance should not be viewed as an exclusively African-American affair. Rather, it must be viewed as an ‘early twentieth-century *Africana* affair’ (Rabaka 2014: 34, emphasis in original). The negative images and stereotypes which had come to characterise the ‘Old Negro’ and the African continent generally, were now turned into positive images. Thus the Harlem Renaissance sought to ‘rehabilitate the image of the black man wherever he was’ (Masolo 1994: 10). Rabaka argues that in order to understand the philosophy of Negritude, one ought to grapple not only with the Harlem Renaissance, but also with the ideas of black thinkers such as Du Bois and Marcus Garvey. Although the radicals of Harlem Renaissance took Africa as a source of inspiration, their conception of it was often Eurocentric. The

sociologist Bernard Magubane pursues similar themes in his book, *The Ties That Bind: African-American Consciousness of Africa*. Yet, the Renaissance radicals were able to retrieve from their African heritage cultural values which they thought were undermined not only by white people, but also by black people themselves. In this regard, Rabaka speaks of ‘continuity in black radical thought’.

Although the Negritude theorists drew from the Renaissance thinkers, they advanced it in innovative and complex ways. In Rabaka’s words: ‘they appropriated and applied liberating visions, views, and values from the precolonial African past to their then colonial and neoconial present’ (2014: 36). He points out that the link between the Harlem Renaissance and the Negritude Movement is not as tenuous as it appears. The Paris based Negritude intellectuals acquainted Harlem based intellectuals mainly through Louis Achille, a former Howard University professor who had emigrated to Paris. In the period between 1930 and 1940, Senghor, Cesaire and Leon Damas were, through Achille, in close contact with African-American writers such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen etc. In reading the works of their African-American counterparts, the Paris based Africans were able to appropriate the political, intellectual and aesthetic insights of the Harlem intellectuals. Rabaka argues that ‘it is here that the strongest line(s) of continuity between these two movements may be ascertained’ (2014: 37). The theorists of the Negritude Movement were not only concerned to vindicate their ‘Negro heritage’ (as Cesaire puts it), but were concerned to critique European imperialism and the values it espoused. Thus, the ‘values of the African past’, which were at all times obliterated by Europeans, were in the discourse of the Negritude foregrounded and used to contribute the contemporary black world. This was not a call to a return to the African past. Nor was it a mere celebration of African past achievements. Rather, it was a call ‘to discover the lessons of “a classical background”, “discipline”, “style”, and technique’ (Rabaka 2014: 38). This is a bit cryptic. But having discovered what is usable in the ‘artistic legacy’ bequeathed to them, the Negritude theorists were able to augment their own artistic achievements.

According to Rabaka, both Cesaire and Senghor championed a ‘critical return’ to the pre-colonial African past. Yet a distinction between their conceptions of the ‘return’ ought to be made. He reports that Cesaire’s return ‘to Africa is more spiritual and cultural than physical, and it requires a critical (dare I say, *dialectical*) exploration of the past, which for many continental and, especially, diasporan Africans means salvaging what we can in the aftermath of the horrors of the African holocaust, enslavement, colonization, segregation, and Eurocentric assimilation’ (2014: 60,

emphasis in original). Unlike Césaire, ‘Senghor’s work consistently exhibited an intense preoccupation with and openness to contemporary European colonial, particularly French, philosophy and culture’ (Rabaka 2014: 61). As such, Senghorian Negritude is characterised by notions of assimilation, synthesis, symbiosis, African socialism and primitivism. This is in contrast to Césairean Negritude which is characterised by an emphasis on African history, self-determination, culture and the struggles of the working people. Rabaka concedes, however, that Senghor’s work, as with Césaire’s, was characterised by complexity and contributed to African and European radical political and philosophical thought. Senghor utilised and synthesised both thought traditions with the hope of creating a ‘Civilization of the Universal’ (Rabaka 2014).

Having engaged in a lengthy but critical discussion of both the Césairean and Senghorian versions of the Negritude philosophy, Rabaka concedes that the two versions combine to contribute not only to Cabralism, but also to Africana critical theory. The contributions of Negritude, Rabaka argues, are to be found in: (i) its cultural kinship with the Harlem Renaissance; (ii) African anti-colonial struggle and the ‘theory and praxis of Pan-Africanism’ (iii) its unique ‘African-inspired poetics’; (iv) its ‘emphasis on the need to “return” to, or better yet the *re-discovering*, appropriating and applying, extending and expanding of indigenous African thought and practices’; (v) its ‘earliest critiques and rejections of the grafting of western European philosophical concepts and categories onto persons of African descent and Africana cultures’; and (vi) its search for a ‘functional philosophy’ i.e. a ‘philosophy that is at once intellectual *and* political, academic *and* activist’ (2014: 81, emphasis in original). Having discussed the Negritude Movement, Rabaka proceeds to ‘look at ways in which Fanon builds on and goes beyond Césaire’s conception of decolonization’ (2014: 83).

According to Rabaka, Fanon was a ‘deep, dialectical thinker and critical theorist of extraordinary insight’ (2014: 87). As such, Fanon and Fanonism have had a great influence on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries particularly on the questions of race and racism. For Rabaka, Fanon wanted to be known as human and was therefore a ‘radically humanist’. Whatever the merits and demerits of this label, assigning labels often gets in the way of a difficult task of thoroughgoing analysis. In any event, as Rabaka correctly puts it, Fanon holds ‘a special place in the hearts and minds of black radicals, revolutionary nationalist, and Pan-Africanists’ (2014: 88). Fundamentally, Fanon was against the colonization of the Africans, their thoughts and their continent. Much like his contemporary Amílcar Cabral, Fanon’s ‘contributions were not merely theoretical or epistemological,

but profoundly *praxeological* (Rabaka 2014: 88, emphasis in original). On the basis of this claim, Rabaka concludes that Cabral was ‘indelibly influenced’ by Fanon and ‘Fanonism’. According to him, Cabral made Fanonism ‘speak to the special needs of the revolutionary decolonization and liberation struggle in Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau’ (Rabaka 2014: 88). He argues that ‘Cabralism is virtually incomprehensible without first grasping Fanonism’ (Rabaka 2014: 89). For Rabaka, Cabral may be the ‘greatest Fanonist of all time’ (2014: 89). Yet, he concedes later on in the book that ‘Cabral was more than a mere Fanon disciple’ (Rabaka 2014: 141). He argues that Fanon’s critique of colonialism went far beyond economic analysis and focused on ‘psycho-social-political pitfalls’ and ‘racial colonialism’. The latter sounds like a tautology. Yet, Rabaka argues that it is to be distinguished from ‘colonialism in a general sense’ in that ‘racial colonialism’ ‘intertwines, interlocks, and intersects with racism, which ideologically undergirds and provides a wrongheaded, racist rationale for the division of the world into white “human beings” and non-white “native” subhuman “things” that are brutishly bound together by white supremacist production and reproduction processes of racial colonialism, as well as *racial capitalism*’ (2014: 114–115, emphasis in original). This is quite a mouthful but it makes some sense. It is also true, as Rabaka insists, that in the world of white supremacy and capitalism, black people ‘do not have the right to exist on their own terms’ (2014: 115).

Thus for black people and the colonised people generally, there is only ‘one real recourse’ – the Fanonist ‘true decolonization’ (anti-racist, anti-colonialist and anti-capitalist revolution). Rabaka concedes that decolonization is a ‘complicated phenomenon’. Following Fanon (1961), he argues that ‘revolutionary decolonization, therefore, makes a distinction between the class politics and class projects of the racially colonized bourgeoisie and those of the wretched of the earth’ (Rabaka 2014: 127). As such, ‘decolonization is not neutral and, consequently, not always automatically in the antiimperialist interests of the wretched of the earth’ (Rabaka 2014: 127). In short, decolonisation can take ‘different directions’. Hence a distinction ought to be made between what Rabaka calls ‘true’ and ‘false’ decolonisation. In discussing Fanon, he hopes to demonstrate how Cabral can be said to complement Fanon’s ‘radical disalienation and revolutionary decolonization’. Rabaka believes that Cabral’s contribution to Africana critical theory ‘deepens’ and at the same time dialectically deviates from Fanon and Fanonism. The following section explores Rabaka’s discussion of Cabral’s contribution to critical theory and revolutionary praxis.

Cabral's Critical Theory and Revolutionary Praxis

Rabaka observes that although Cabral did not quite present 'his critical theory in any discursive or systematic manner', he nevertheless made 'critical comments' on colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism. This is not quite a profound insight from Rabaka. A discursive or systematic contribution to critical theory is not a *sin qua non* for a critique of colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism. It is quite possible that Cabral did not see himself as contributing to 'critical theory' in any case. There are any number of African/black intellectual traditions and Rabaka himself is well aware of this. He almost contradicts himself when he says Cabral's ideas can be understood as a culmination of several waves of anti-colonialism, Pan-Africanism and black radical politics 'that aimed at developing a critical theory of imperialism and revolution in colonial and neocolonial Africa' (Rabaka 2014: 152). What brings Cabral's thought in line with other forms of critical theory is his critique of domination and his theory of liberation. What distinguishes his critical theory from others is that Cabral was concerned with the domination of the downtrodden the world over, not just the developed countries. As Rabaka puts it, 'Cabral challenges conventional critical theory in the sense that his critical theory is not quarantined to the life-worlds and life-struggles of white workers in capitalist societies' (2014: 152). Over and above that, his ideas were both 'revolutionary nationalist' and 'revolutionary humanist'.

The fact that Cabral was concerned with the liberation of the oppressed people everywhere, means that his critical theory is essentially 'global theory'. It transcends the Eurocentric limitations of the Frankfurt School, for example. In Rabaka's words, it 'traverses the colonialist/capitalist divide and engages the world as it actually exists' (2014: 153). Cabral's critical theory not only combats global imperialism, but also 'Eurocentric critical theory'. Cabral's struggle for 'progress for our people' is such that it critiques 'anyone and anything that might hinder human beings from democratically to their highest and fullest potential' (Rabaka 2014: 154). Rabaka goes on to argue that Cabral's critical theory is also a historical, cultural and social theory. For Cabral, it was important to struggle not only against the 'enemy', but also against forms of oppression within the ranks of the oppressed. Fighting against oppression would require a 'concrete philosophy', or a philosophy of praxis, and not simply praying or wishing it away. This concrete philosophy, 'requires a radical break with the abstractness of academic and/or "traditional" philosophy, and a dialectical deconstruction and reconstruction of philosophy towards its practical potentialities and possibilities' (Rabaka 2014: 159).

Rabaka reports that his Africana critical theory ‘refuses to be reduced to a biologically determined or racially essentialist position’ (2014: 155). As such, he argues that there are white people who have made progressive contributions to national liberation struggles. He observes that this line of thought enables one to avoid what Cornel West calls ‘the pitfalls of racial reasoning’ (1993: 21). In this regard, Rabaka declares that Cabral prefigures Cornel West’s ‘coalition politics’. It is for this reason that Cabral was not just against colonialism or racial oppression in the colonies, but also capitalist exploitation and imperialism more broadly. Cabral’s critical theory, therefore, is ‘aimed at the complete destruction and revolutionary replacement of the imperialist world-system(s) with new forms of government and social organizations that would perpetually promote democratic socialist global co-existence’ (Rabaka 2014: 156). Cabral located the liberation struggles of the oppressed people in a global and historical context.

One of the major problems with colonialism and imperialism is their hindrance to national consciousness, national culture and national liberation. This is something that Cabral understood very well. Once the colonised regain these important elements of their being, they would transcend the ‘sad position of being a people without history’ (Cabral 2007: 156). This turns on the question of culture primarily. According to Rabaka, ‘culture is the conscious consequence of the economic and political activities of any given society’ (2014: 158). Hence colonialism builds systems that stifle cultural life of the colonised people. This makes cultural resistance a key element of anti-colonial struggles. In engaging Cabral’s critical theory of colonialism and imperialism, Rabaka argues that:

...it is important to emphasize that it essentially argues colonialists utilized unprecedented violence to colonize the lives, labors, and lands of other peoples; that superior science, technology, and military enabled colonialism to succeed in its formative phase; and, finally, that technology transformed the means of production, intensified the socio-politico-economic organization of labor, and brutally brought the cultures and products of colonized peoples on the world market. (2014: 161)

Cabral was critical of neocolonialism (as an ‘indirect domination ...by means of political power made up mainly or completely of native agents’) as he was of colonialism (cited in Rabaka 2014: 162-163). Rabaka points out that in this regard, Cabral was indebted to Fanon’s ideas in the book *The Wretched of the Earth*. Rabaka says: ‘Faithfully following Fanon, then, Cabral’s critical theory goes far to identify, explain, critique, and combat neocolonialism’ (2014: 162).

For Rabaka, ‘imperialism is the principle foci of Africana critical theory’ primarily because it ‘retards colonized peoples’ development and has deep ramifications in both the public and private spheres of the dominated peoples’ lives’ (2014: 163). For Cabral, in order to evolve an effective critique of imperialism, one ought to begin with pre-colonial African history, culture, and society. The point is not to romanticise the African past. It is to show that colonialism interrupted or disrupted African history and culture. Rabaka declares:

In light of this Cabral deliberately and contradictorily chose to analyse precolonial African societies utilizing the vocabulary and concepts emerging from Marxist discourse on class formation and class contradictions. His writings demonstrate that he firmly believed that class antagonisms existed within several African societies long before the onslaught of European racial colonial conquest, but that this historical fact had been hidden by the edifice and subterfuge of the racial state. (2014: 165)

One can hear Archie Mafeje objecting to this by saying ‘To conduct class analysis we do not have to invent classes, but rather to be alert to possible mediations in the process of class formation’ (1981: 130). Mafeje’s point is that overreliance on theory (however progressive the theory may be) without taking seriously concrete conditions, is likely to be as dangerous as the reactionary scholarship it is meant to critique. Bernard Magubane spoke at length about the confusion between class and social stratification in the ‘colonial situation’ (Magubane 1968). Social stratification is a descriptive concept which ‘implies sets of positions in a hierarchical arrangement’ (Magubane 1968). It simply means income differentiation, but not necessarily different class positions. Class, on the other hand, is a much more analytical concept insofar as it relates to primary divisions in society on the basis of individuals’ relationship to the primary means of production. As such, due to its antagonistic nature, class divisions imply political action. What does Rabaka make of Cabral’s pointed critique of the orthodox Marxian position on the universality of the history of class struggle? Cabral observes:

Does history begin only from the moment of class and, consequently, of class struggle? To reply in the affirmative would be to place outside history the whole period of life of human groups from the discovery of hunting, and later sedentary and nomadic agriculture, to cattle raising and to the private appropriation of land. It would also be to consider – and this we refuse to accept – that various human groups in Africa, Asia and Latin America were living without history or outside history at the moment they were subjected to the yoke of imperialism. (1979: 124-5)

In his excellent book, titled *The Theory and Ethnography of African Social Formations*, Archie Mafeje goes out of his way to demonstrate that the precolonial Great Lakes region, for example, does not lend itself to class analysis even though there were patterns of exploitation.

In any case, Rabaka goes on to discuss Cabral's conception of imperialism. Cabral's (2007) position on imperialism goes beyond the question of intervention into the colonies. Lenin (1999), too, saw imperialism as more than a mere question of annexation, but over and above that as the 'highest stage of capitalism'. For Cabral, in order for imperialism to fulfil its mission, it must encompass cultural, social, political as well as economic factors. Thus although imperialism may introduced money economy, nation states and so on, these were not to the benefit of the African people but the imperialists themselves. Although in classical revolutionary theory colonialism and imperialism denote different stages in history, Rabaka argues that Cabral used these terms 'synonymously'. In doing so, Rabaka suggests, Cabral avoided drawing 'hard and fast discursive lines between "First World" (i.e. "developed") societies and "Third World" (i.e. "underdeveloped" or so-called "backward") societies' (2014: 166). For Cabral, colonialism and imperialism led to 'blocked development'. 'On the other hand, his conception of "blocked development" was quite vague when he used the term to refer to the relative failure of imperialism to bring about the growth of productive forces and the birth of a proletariat' (Rabaka 2014: 167). Rabaka goes on to argue that in Cabral's critical theory, imperialism 'did not do enough to create conditions conducive to an anti-colonial and Decolonial democratic socialist revolution. Hence, in a Marxist sense, it might be said that imperialism in Africa, especially in light of neocolonialism, was not sufficiently exploitative enough' (2014: 167). This is an orthodox Marxian position which sees capitalism as a necessarily stage for development, and ultimately socialism. Ironically, however, the Chinese experiment with socialism was succeeded by capitalism – underpinned by state-capital. If capitalism is a necessary stage, is the cruelty visited by it on poor peasants and workers justified? Rabaka does not entertain these issues. The issue is that in avoiding this question, one is left wondering whether Rabaka actually commits himself to universalizing tendencies of orthodox Marxian discourse. At any rate, he goes on to argue that Cabral made a distinction between classical imperialism and neo-imperialism. The two, Rabaka observes, are important in explaining the origins and evolution of 'blocked development'. The only problem that Rabaka has with this idea is that it does not explain 'the failure of imperialism as a transformative force that contributes to conditions conducive to revolutionary change in the

racial colonial world' (2014: 167). If this is the only problem that Rabaka has with imperialism then he is not likely to find answers to his inquiry. Imperialism, as an advanced stage in capitalism, is not likely to be altruistic and kind to the wretched of the earth. Nor is it clear why Rabaka expects it to be. He blames lack of explanations to this issue on Cabral himself and says the latter is at his weakest in failing to explain why imperialism is not a transformative force. One must confess that it is a bit strange to expect imperialism to bring about 'conducive conditions' of any kind. What of the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles?

Rabaka argues that, theoretically, workers throughout the world are united in their fight against imperialism. Yet practically, there can be no actual operational unity between the worker in Europe and America and their counterparts in the ex-colonies. He says 'Cabral openly admitted that that it is not realistic to hope for any alliance between these disparate arms of the world-historic revolutionary struggle' (Rabaka 2014: 168). This sounds like a fairly honest confession, but it makes nonsense of Pan-African struggles (which are *ab initio* transatlantic). What does Cabral's and Rabaka's confession mean for the struggles of the continental Africans and their diasporan counterparts? At any rate, in the ex-colonies conditions are made worse by the problem of neo-colonialism and the petty bourgeois leadership which perpetuates it. Rabaka observes that 'the actual degree of change and independence is not as great as it appears since the racially colonized petite bourgeoisie is quite incapable of rupturing their wrongheaded relationship of subordination and exploitation with European and American imperialism' (2014: 168). Cabral argues that for development to occur, there must be complete freedom. There are people who do not see freedom or democracy as a necessary condition for development. Such a discussion merits a separate article. Although Cabral was clear on the distinction between colonialism and neo-colonialism, Rabaka argues that he was silent on the link between 'post-independence colonialism' and 'post-World War II international capitalism'. He argues that this lack of clarity on the part of Cabral led to a '*conceptual cul-de-sac*' on how imperialism influences and operates in neocolonial societies. For Rabaka, this presents us with a paradox:

On the one hand, Cabral argued that in light of the contradictions at the heart of imperialism the evolution of capitalism directly corresponds with the emergence of African nationalism. Nonetheless, counterbalanced against this, he also surmises that neocolonialism is a necessary and completely logical offshoot of classical colonialism. On this account, imperialism is simultaneously extremely malleable and motive, always and ever adaptive to change, all the while ironically remaining simultaneously narcissistic,

hedonistic, nihilistic, and totally self-destructive. All of this ultimately leaves unanswered the preeminent question of how and under what specific conditions can national liberation movements within the racial colonial world avoid the pitfalls and poisons of neocolonialism. (2014: 169)

But the genius of Cabral, like Fanon and Césaire (1972), was in pointing out that the major political forces in contemporary history and culture were anticolonial national liberation struggles. For Rabaka, therefore, '*the class struggle between European workers and European capital has been superseded as the foremost historical force by the struggles of simultaneously anti-racist, anti-colonialist, and, therefore, anti-imperialist agents against, well imperialism (and neo-imperialism)*' (2014: 169, emphasis in original).

Rabaka argues that Cabral's explanation of the degeneration of 'nationalism' into neocolonialism was 'predestined' because imperialism was such that it did not make conditions 'conducive' to revolutionary changes in the ex-colonies. Yet it needs to be said that although this dialectic explains the inadequacies of nationalism, it naively assumes that imperialism could not have been to the benefit of the colonised. Yet, he submits that Cabral's notion of class suicide was an alternative to the orthodox Marxist idea that imperialism was a necessary stage for or 'conducive' to revolutionary change. The class suicide thesis was a call on the African petty bourgeoisie to steer clear of power mongering and neocolonialism, and for them to join forces with the downtrodden. Rabaka pointedly asks 'why would the inchoate African petite bourgeoisie commit suicide? Why would it do anything different than the longstanding and even more privileged European and American bourgeoisies, which it apishly idolizes and materialistically mirrors' (2014: 171)? The two questions are in a sense rhetorical since Rabaka goes on to answer them in this illustrated quote:

In Cabral's critical theory of class suicide he identified two characteristics of the racially colonized bourgeoisie that he believed provided it with a unique disposition in relationship to imperialism and revolution. First, the position of the racially colonized bourgeoisie under colonialism and neocolonialism in many ways made it a prime competitor for state power based on the simple fact that no other class the adequate skills and knowledge to wield the colossal colonial state or neocolonial state. Secondly, the racially colonized bourgeoisie, for the most part, shared myriad familial and cultural connections with the masses (i.e. the peasantry) of their respective countries, which meant that they remained within earshot of the frustrations and aspirations of the peasantry. (2014: 171).

Yet, for Archie Mafeje, although the notion of class suicide is desirable, so far there are no examples of it. Mafeje observes:

Everywhere, even the radical petit-bourgeoisie continues to be privileged after the revolution or independence. ... Even in cases where they started the revolutionary movement, they cannot be judged as having died socially until the revolutionary class which is their constituency transforms them into its own image i.e. until their antithesis negates them. The opportunism of the petit-bourgeoisie, including the radical elements, can only be defeated by a working class, and a peasantry which has grown and matured in the struggle for a New Democracy. Bourgeois or petit-bourgeois charity has so far led to immiseration of and death among the labouring classes in under-developed countries including the 'socialist' examples. (1992: 52)

Yet Cabral saw the petty bourgeoisie as potentially progressive in ways that orthodox Marxists did not. Rabaka suggests that Cabral's war on imperialism took a three-pronged approach. First, the people of Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau had to do away with racial colonial relations with Portugal. Second, the liberation movement had to lobby the United Nations. Third, and this seems to have been the last resort, the people of Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau would wage war of national liberation through the armed struggle. These elaborations do not consider the context of these two then Portuguese colonies, Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau, in the overall scheme of Portuguese colonialism, the nature of Portuguese colonialism itself, and the internal divisions between Cape Verdeans and Guineans in the context of the liberation movement. Ultimately, Rabaka argues that Cabral distinguished himself from orthodox Marxists by arguing that the mode of production rather than class struggle, is the 'true and permanent motive force of history' (Cabral in Rabaka 2014: 177). He points out that Cabral has always been accused of being a Marxist, although there are reasons to believe that this may not be the case. Indeed, Bernard Magubane declares that Cabral 'did not want to be called a Marxist' (1983: 12).

Cabral often urged the colonised and the liberation movements to speak from the standpoint of their own conditions, rather than superimposing generic and catchall phrases and categories. This is what Rabaka calls 'ideological independence' and a warning against 'conceptual incarceration'. So instead reading Cabral as a Marxist, it might be better to read him as a 'materialist' (Rabaka 2014). Insofar as Cabral's ideas transcend Marxism, he is according to Rabaka a 'critical theorist'. This is not to deny the importance of Marxism in radical thought. Rather, it is to take seriously the fact that Marxism is not synonymous with radicalism. It is but one of many strands in radical thought. Cabral's critical theory, therefore, is important precisely

because it transcends the inadequacies of Eurocentric critical theory. This is where Rabaka finds Cabralism most useful, particularly because it converges with his Africana critical theory. First, Africana critical theory ‘comprehends that it is not merely “social problems” that must be addressed, but also social constructions, such as “race”’ (Rabaka 2014: 189). Second, ‘Africana critical theory, unlike most Marxist discourse and contemporary European and European American critical theory, comprehends that it is not only race and class struggles that obstruct and impede the improvement of human life-worlds and lived experiences. Surely gender and sexuality must be considered, amongst other areas and issues’ (Rabaka 2014: 190). In taking all of these factors into account, Africana critical theory appropriates some of Cabral’s insights and brings them to bear on questions of race, class, gender, sexuality etc. Rabaka concedes, however, that Cabral did not necessarily advance any theory of gender and sexuality.

What is important to bear in mind is that unlike orthodox Marxists, Cabral did not view the working class alone as the primary agents of revolutionary change. Having studied concrete conditions of the Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau, he concluded that the struggle had to be waged by various classes, ethnicities and so on. Due in part to his reluctance to accept willy-nilly radical sounding categories, Cabral knew that much of what was said to be ‘African socialism’ was no more than ‘reformist nationalism’ (Rabaka 2014). ‘One of the bridges Cabral identified to aid the transition from colonialism to decolonial democratic socialism was *revolutionary nationalism*’ (Rabaka 2014: 210, emphasis in original). This is based on history, culture and ‘revolutionary anti-imperialist praxis’ of those who are waging the liberation struggle. Rabaka says Cabral’s revolutionary nationalism was infused with ‘revolutionary humanism’. His verdict is that ‘Amilcar Cabral was not a Marxist or a Marxist-Leninist, but an African revolutionary’ (Rabaka 2014: 213).

Cabral’s work centered on the question of national liberation. It is important to note, as Rabaka suggests, that Cabral made a distinction between national independence and national liberation. Rabaka explains:

The former, on the one hand, entails the transfer of political power from the colonizer to the colonized without any substantial structural (or superstructural) changes in the newly ‘independent’ nation-state. The latter, on the other hand, essentially involves the complete destruction of the colonial apparatus (most often by way of armed struggle and a systematic program of authentic decolonization and re-Africanization), which ultimately leads to the emergence of a new type of human being and nation-state... (2014: 219).

Rabaka believes that this distinction is important if one is to understand Cabral's critical theory of national liberation. Cabral's idea of national liberation turned on four 'coordinates': (i) 'rescued and reclaimed history'; (ii) the salience of culture; (iii) inchoate African class structure; and (iv) the struggle against colonialism and imperialism (Rabaka 2014). Central to these four coordinates is the notion of return to the source. Rabaka reports that for Cabral, the notion of return to the source meant that the liberation movement must preserve its precolonial traditions and values. Yet, these traditions and values must be transformed through the difficult process of 'revolutionary decolonization' and 'revolutionary reAfricanization'. Rabaka links the notion of return to the Ghanaian concept of *sankofa* which 'entails taking from the past those things which are deemed to be most useful in the present with the ultimate intention of moving forward... [It] boils down to *the benevolent use of knowledge from the past to positively alter the present and ensure the future*' (2014: 244, emphasis in original). The question of traditional values inside the liberation movement is far more complex than the simplicity of this elaboration suggests. Early on, and in the spirit of Negritude, Cabral advocated a return to the source. Later on, however, he changed his view, for the PAIGC got caught in the contradiction between, on the one hand, preserve traditional values and, on the other, eradicate them from the movement. In the end, a number of what Cabral called 'negative practices' were expurgated from the movement. Others resisted, though. What Rabaka takes to be the most important aspect of Cabral's contribution to radical politics and to African critical theory 'is his high level of conceptual consistency and pragmatism' (Rabaka 2014: 248).

Cabral and the African Tradition of Critical Theory

For Rabaka, Cabral presents African theory with significant challenges. These challenges necessitate a major overhaul or 'rethinking' of critical theory generally. What is most important about Cabral's ideas is the fact that they were not intended merely to contribute to theory, but to liberate the people of Africa, the diaspora, and the downtrodden more generally. Insofar as this is true, his ideas must be viewed as a contribution to a concrete philosophy or, as Rabaka puts it, '*an African philosophy of praxis: a historically nuanced, culturally grounded, socially situated, and politically charged form of critical social theory that speaks to the special needs of continental and diasporan Africans*' (2014: 255, *emphasis in original*).

Although Cabral valued the idea of learning from one's concrete realities, he was not averse to learning from others. Rabaka says: 'In good dialectical fashion Cabral suggested that we start with our own circumstances and

situations, but maintain an *epistemic* and *experimental openness*, and be willing and able to appropriate and adapt the advances or breakthroughs of others' (2014: 256, *emphasis in original*). Inasmuch as Rabaka holds Cabral's ideas in great esteem, he nevertheless cautions against an uncritical regurgitation of Cabral's ideas. He argues that while much of his ideas are relevant to today's struggles, one needs to be mindful of new socio-political challenges which Cabral may not have foreseen. This is a call for developing and generating new ideas in order to supplement ideas of intellectual progenitors such as Cabral. In making this plea, Rabaka is not saying Cabral's ideas are outdated. On the contrary, he believes that they are still relevant to this day – particularly in relation to struggles against racism, neocolonialism, imperialism etc. Thus, Cabralism 'does offer critical concepts and innovative analytical categories' (Rabaka 2014: 257). Equally important is the fact that:

Cabral's critical return to the source(s) suggests in no uncertain terms that Africana critical theory of contemporary society concern itself with the deconstruction of European-driven continental and diasporan African philosophical discourse, the reconstruction of a radically decolonized and re-Africanized critical theory and praxis tradition – that is to say, what I have been referring to as the Africana tradition of critical theory and revolutionary praxis. (Rabaka 2014: 258, *emphasis in original*)

When Rabaka speaks of an Africana critical theory in the contemporary moment, he speaks of a critique, deconstruction and, at times, appropriation of abstract academic and Eurocentric discourses.

What Cabral does is to provide the Africana critical theory 'with a deep and abiding grounding in African history, culture, and struggle' that links the struggles on the African continent with those of the African diaspora and workers and peasants around the world (Rabaka 2014: 261). Africana critical theory, such as Rabaka conceives of it, is not a mere 'neo-black radicalism'. Rather, it is 'a twenty-first century outgrowth of efforts' aimed at deconstruction and reconstruction of the life-worlds of the continental and diasporan Africans. In discussing Cabral's ideas and praxis, Rabaka hopes to introduce some of the 'core characteristics of the Africana tradition of critical theory' (2014: 265). According to him, Africana critical theory is 'incomprehensible without a thorough and critical knowledge of Africana intellectual history' (Rabaka 2014: 268). Hence he engages not only Cabral, but also such intellectual progenitors as Césaire, Senghor and Fanon. He argues that on the basis of this rich African and diasporan intellectual history and tradition, Africana critical theory cannot be dismissed as nothing more than 'Frankfurt School critical theory in a blackface'. If anything, the Africana critical theory pre-dates the Eurocentric critical theory insofar as Rabaka traces it to Du Bois.

Although Rabaka dissociates African critical theory from other forms of critical theory, he nonetheless concedes that it shares with them ‘the same methodological orientation and approach’ (2014: 283). Methodologically, the ultimate goal of his critical theory is to: ‘(1) comprehend the established society; (2) criticise its contradictions and conflicts; and (3) create egalitarian (most often radical/revolutionary democratic socialist) alternatives’ (Rabaka 2014: 283). Furthermore, Rabaka acknowledges that the Africana critical theory is not only grounded in Africana studies, but also emerges from Africana philosophy. He believes that Africana critical theory is about offering alternatives to what actually exists. It does this by projecting possibilities of what ought to be done and what could be done. It is not entirely clear whether this is necessarily a new or novel idea. Most, if not all, radical theories turn on this question of finding alternatives and on what is to be done. On this score, Rabaka belabours a fairly conventional idea.

Conclusion

To conclude, it needs to be said that Rabaka’s book, *Concepts of Cabralism*, is quite exceptional. This is necessarily so because, unlike other studies on Cabral, Rabaka did not just engage Cabral’s ideas, but actually contextualised them by locating them within the rich black radical intellectual tradition – what he calls ‘Africana tradition of critical theory’. Specifically, Rabaka traces the genealogy of Cabral’s intellectual and political thought to key thinkers of the Negritude Movement such as Aime Cesaire and Leopold Senghor, and then to Frantz Fanon. Rabaka goes on to demonstrate that unlike other revolutionaries, Cabral was not merely regurgitating or applying orthodox Marxism. Instead, Cabral studied the concrete conditions of Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau, and led the liberation struggles of his people accordingly. In doing so, he was able to enrich revolutionary theory. For Rabaka, Cabral was not only a ‘revolutionary nationalist’ and ‘revolutionary humanist’, but also a critical theorist. Hence Rabaka’s Cabral should be read as contributing to ‘Africana critical theory’.

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