

## RICHARD WRIGHT: REALIZING THE PROMISE OF THE WEST

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### 1. Introduction

The enormously influential and prolific American writer Richard Wright (1908-1960) was born to sharecroppers, was largely self-taught, and grew up poor in the Jim Crow South (Mississippi and Memphis).<sup>1</sup> At the age of nineteen, he moved to Chicago where he worked as postal clerk and insurance salesman but read voraciously and wrote poetry and short stories in his limited spare time. In 1933, Wright joined the Chicago branch of the John Reed Club (a literary organization sponsored by the Communist party) and soon after joined the party itself. He decided in 1937 to pursue a literary career and so moved to New York City. Wright had an early triumph with his book of short stories *Uncle Tom's Children*.<sup>2</sup> His fame and lasting influence however rests on two hugely successful books—his novel *Native Son*<sup>3</sup> and his memoir *Black Boy*.<sup>4</sup> In 1944, Wright broke publicly from the Communist party in the essay “I Tried to Be a Communist,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. In 1947, he and his family moved permanently to France, which is where he died in 1960.

Wright had a first-rate analytical mind, was blessed with sociological imagination and uncanny psychological insight, and was, during the early part of his adulthood, politically active in the radical labor movement. However, within the African American intellectual

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<sup>1</sup> For helpful accounts Wright's life, see Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, Second Edition*

<sup>2</sup> Richard Wright, “Uncle Tom's Children,” in *Richard Wright: Early Works*, (New York: Library of America, 1991), 221-441. Originally published in 1938. I discuss the moral and political significance of these stories in Tommie Shelby, “The Ethics of Uncle Tom's Children,” *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Spring 2012): 513-532.

<sup>3</sup> Wright, “Native Son,” in *Early Works*, pp. 443-850. Originally published in 1940.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, “Black Boy (American Hunger),” in *Richard Wright: Later Works*, (New York: Library of America, 1991), 1-365. *Black Boy* originally published in 1945; *American Hunger* originally published in 1977.

tradition he is primarily known as an author of fiction. In addition to *Native Son*, he published three other novels during his lifetime, *The Outsider*,<sup>5</sup> *Savage Holiday*,<sup>6</sup> and *The Long Dream*.<sup>7</sup> (*Lawd Today!*,<sup>8</sup> the first novel Wright completed, wasn't published until after his death.) However, he also wrote a number of important though neglected non-fiction works, including *12 Million Black Voices*,<sup>9</sup> *Black Power*,<sup>10</sup> *The Color Curtain*,<sup>11</sup> *White Man, Listen!*,<sup>12</sup> and *Pagan Spain*.<sup>13</sup>

The primary objective of this chapter is to offer a charitable reconstruction of Wright's political thought that brings his worldview into focus, that indicates key shifts in his thinking over time, and that takes his thought seriously as social and political theory. I say "charitable" to distinguish my approach from commentary on Wright that is largely polemical—that seeks to deflate, debunk, dismiss, or otherwise criticize but without first rendering the target in its most compelling form.<sup>14</sup> Polemical critical commentary of course has its place. However, my underlying aim is not to criticize Wright but to see what we might learn from him, which requires that we consider his views in their best light. Moreover, I will not interpret Wright's thought through the lens of psychology or explain his ideas in terms

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<sup>5</sup> Wright, "The Outsider," in *Later Works*, 367-841. Originally published in 1953.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, *Savage Holiday* (New York: Avon, 1954).

<sup>7</sup> Wright, *The Long Dream* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000). Originally published in 1958.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, "Lawd Today!" in *Early Works*, 1-219. Originally published in 1963.

<sup>9</sup> Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States*. (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002). Originally published in 1941.

<sup>10</sup> Wright, "Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos," in *Black Power: Three Books from Exile*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 1-427. Originally published in 1954.

<sup>11</sup> Wright, "The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference," in *Black Power*, 429-609. Originally published in 1956.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, "White Man, Listen!" in *Black Power*, 631-812. Originally published in 1957.

<sup>13</sup> Wright, *Pagan Spain* (Jackson: Banner Books, 1995). Originally published in 1957.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Sherley Anne Williams, "Papa Dick and Sister-Womam: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright," in *American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Fritz Fleischmann (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982), 394-415; Kwame Anthony Appiah, "A Long Way from Home: Wright in the Gold Coast," in *Richard Wright*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 173-190.

some feature of his biographical background or social context.<sup>15</sup> The chapter should therefore be read as philosophical interpretation, not intellectual history. This kind of philosophical reconstruction, I hasten to add, need not be hagiographic. Nor is the point to “vindicate” a black thinker, to show that Wright is worthy of study alongside the likes of Hobbes, Rousseau, or Marx. And my interpretation of Wright, though sympathetic, should not be taken to suggest that I agree with all the views I explicate.

Commentators sometimes attempt to reconstruct Wright’s political thought relying primarily on his fiction, even treating his characters as mouthpieces for Wright’s political and social-theoretic views.<sup>16</sup> My reconstruction however is based primarily on his non-fiction works. I am reluctant to base my interpretation of Wright’s political thought on his fiction, and not solely for the reason that I am a political philosopher and not a literary critic. Certainly, political themes and ideas are taken up, sometimes at considerable length, in his novels and short stories. For example, Wright’s fictional characters often give long politico-philosophical speeches, dense with theoretical claims. There is the famous courtroom speech given by Bigger Thomas’s attorney Boris Max in *Native Son*. There is also Cross Damon’s speech to detective Houston in *The Outsider* and Tyree Tucker’s speech to his son Fishbelly in *The Long Dream*. But a novel, while sometimes resting on or suggesting theoretical claims, is not a sustained political argument. Though we can sometimes extract a political vision or social critique by reading between the lines, we cannot simply assume that these fictional characters speak for Wright.

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 80-85; and Nina Kressner Cobb, “Richard Wright and the Third World,” in *Critical Essays on Richard Wright*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 228-239.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), chap. 11; and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), chap. 5.

In fact, in his early literary manifesto “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” Wright counsels black writers to avoid reducing their art to politics.<sup>17</sup> Though a social-theoretic “perspective” should inform their work, black writers should not use their writing to convert the masses to a political ideology. Nor should they write propaganda. The writer is not a preacher, teacher, or politician. The writer should not be a mouthpiece for a political organization. The autonomous craft of writing defines the writer’s vocation. Writers are not simply to depict reality (as if they were social scientists or journalists) but must use their own imagination and feeling in the production of art.

Through his non-fiction writings, Wright offers a clear, fresh, coherent, and highly controversial political perspective. While he was a relentless and perceptive critic of Western civilization, he was also a staunch defender of many Western ideals. He believed that Western peoples have committed unspeakable crimes against humanity, particularly against peoples not considered “white.” Yet the problems the West has bequeathed to us all can only be solved by Western ideas and practices. “The West” is a set of ideals not yet realized (not even in the Western world) but worth realizing.

Wright’s general political outlook, I will show, rests on an underlying theory of historical development. He viewed history as progressive—as a long story of humanity’s struggle to control both the external environment and the psychological forces within, bringing them under the control of reason, which has its highest expression in science and industrialization. This theory of history owes as much to Enlightenment ideals, Max Weber’s theory of modernity, the Chicago school of sociology, and Freudian psychoanalysis as it does

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<sup>17</sup> Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” in *Richard Wright Reader*, ed. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre (New York: Da Capo, 1997), 36-49. Originally published in 1937.

to Marxism.<sup>18</sup> Wright is more astute and profound when diagnosing social ills or identifying obstacles to human flourishing than he is when explaining the core dimensions of the good society or charting a feasible path to such a society. He didn't possess a well-developed normative political philosophy. He did, however, have some core moral convictions, including a conception of the good life, and these convictions structured his political opinions. The underlying normative ideal he was committed to is of a free, secular, and rational world of equals. Wright considered himself to be perceptive and intuitive but also a man of science and an uncompromising rationalist. He regarded religious faith and race thinking not only as superstitions, myths, and mass delusions but also as dangerous forms of ideology that foster irrationality, domination, exploitation and violence. They must eventually both be swept away if a just cosmopolitan global order is to be realized.

My discussion is broken into two main parts. The first and most substantial segment considers Wright's theory of the condition and emancipation of African Americans in the United States. The second examines his account of the colonial and post-colonial lives of Africans and Asians. In both parts, attention is given to Wright's views on the nature of racism, his conception of Western modernity, and his theory of the psychological consequences of racial domination. I also take up his engagement with Marxism, black nationalism, and liberalism, situating his thought with respect to these well-known doctrines.

## 2. The Negro in America

The most developed theoretical treatment of the history and condition of African Americans in Wright's non-fiction work is *12 Million Black Voices*. In his review of the book, Horace

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<sup>18</sup> See George E. Kent, *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1972), pp. 76-97; Carla Cappetti, "Sociology of an Existence: Richard Wright and the Chicago School," *Black American Literature* 12 (1985): 25-43.

Cayton says it is “more than just description; it is a philosophy of the history of the Negro in America and a frame of reference for the study of Negro-white relations in this country.”<sup>19</sup>

The book charts a path from slavery to the doorstep of freedom. As it is key to understanding Wright’s early political thought, I briefly sketch the book’s main argument.

According to Wright, black peoples of the West were created by slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, “a weird and paradoxical birth” (12). The slave trade and the middle passage constituted a kind of spiritual death, destroying the African tribal identities of the enslaved. White colonialists, and in particular the white landholding class (whom Wright calls “Lords of the Land”), were caught in an irreconcilable contradiction between their commitment to liberty and their practice of slavery. Landowners were progressive insofar as they were leaving much of feudalism behind (particularly superstition and social rank by birth) and embracing Enlightenment ideals of reason, science, and technology.

Wright accepts, in broad outline at least, the Marxist theories of exploitation and ideology. Slave traders and slaveholders were motivated by profit and the need to secure labor for the production of cash crops for a global market. Slaves of African descent were mere instruments in the quest for financial gain. Racial ideology and Christian dogma were used, often in combination, to justify black bondage and to pit the white poor against black slaves (16-17, 24-25). Black-white relations were subsequently shaped by white paternalism and white cruelty, which are both a cultural legacy of slavery and its ideology (18, 49). But growth in technology (the industrializing force that is machine-based production), aided by land made infertile by overuse, would ultimately destroy the world of slavery and scatter black folk across the nation, mostly to growing cities (25). Enter the “Bosses of the

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<sup>19</sup> Horace Cayton, “Wright’s New Book More than a Study of Social Status,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 15, 1941.

Buildings,” the Northern finance capitalists and industrialists. Their mode of production was at odds with the Lords of the Land. Thus it was inevitable that these two worlds (the “world of machines” and the “world of slaves”) and these two elite classes (Bosses of the Buildings and Lords of the Land) would find themselves in irreconcilable conflict. Though these white elites clashed, they were nevertheless in accord that blacks must either emigrate or remain subordinate. Neither was ready to accept blacks as equal citizens in the United States.

Wright emphasizes the degrading socio-psychological consequences for blacks living under Jim Crow. For example, he laments the necessity to perform servility for fear of violent reprisal and the need to guide one’s conduct by anticipating what whites will find acceptable and non-threatening (35). These imperatives created an undignified culture of dissembling (41-43). To openly protest was to court torture then death, usually at the hands of poor whites, who generally accepted the ideology of white supremacy. Fear of the white mob and reluctance to retaliate engender self-loathing and recrimination among blacks (46-47). Black religion functions primarily as comfort, hope, and escape under these oppressive conditions. It also softens resentment and indignation, and it eases psychological pain (67-73).<sup>20</sup>

Within the racialized class structure of post-slavery US society, there were actually three classes of whites—landowners, bankers and industrialists, and poor white workers (35). The masses of blacks had to compete with white workers to survive. Economic and political powerlessness made blacks vulnerable to exploitation from Southern landowners. White landowners persuaded poor whites that they were a part of great white race destined to rule

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<sup>20</sup> These consequences of oppression under the Southern segregation regime are vividly dramatized in *Uncle Tom’s Children* and in *The Long Dream*.

over darker mankind, thus undermining interracial working class unity and leaving both black and white workers poor and exploited (46-47).

Technology in agriculture made sharecropping obsolete and created the day laborer and the migrant worker (79). The great migration (after World War I) was spurred by the demand for labor in the North, supplemented by the black press's characterization of the North as a land of promise (86-87). But the black migrants weren't ready for city life in the North (93-100). Their families were weak. They still relied heavily on religious ritual and superstition. They had no wealth or property to speak of. They had limited understanding of modern commercial life, with its unforgiving, cold cash nexus. The speed and ethnic diversity of city life was alien. They had no experience with political or civic organizations besides churches and burial societies. Their personalities had been distorted by decades of bondage and backward racialized feudal norms, making them ignorant, naïve, and fearful of whites.

Poor European immigrants were able to adapt to urban social organization and to achieve upward mobility. But blacks from the South were not. Wright gives a complex two-part explanation for why this was so. First, with limited skills, black migrants were restricted to manual labor and domestic work with no possibility for advancement. White immigrants had skills appropriate for the industrial age. Vocational and professional schools refused to train blacks in the higher skills and trades. White workers wouldn't allow blacks to join their unions, wanted to keep the best-paid work for themselves, yet hated blacks for being strikebreakers and lowering white wages. In addition to being paid low wages, black workers were forced to do the heaviest, dirtiest, and most dangerous work (118). This conflict between white and black workers was to the advantage of their employers and thus they encouraged and exploited the antagonism (119).

Second, whites refused to live among blacks, creating complex forms of residential segregation in ghettos. The Bosses of the Buildings instigated and profited from white racism in the housing market. Wright focused on the urban “kitchenette” to explain the housing situation of new black migrants. A kitchenette is a one-room apartment with a small gas stove and single sink that was created by carving up a larger apartment previously inhabited by whites. Those living in a kitchenette shared a bathroom with several other residents. These overpriced and overcrowded apartments were, in Wright’s words, “our prison, our death sentence without trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks” (106). The kitchenette breeds and fosters disease. It invites crime. It destroys families—ending marriages, causing teenage pregnancy, and pushing boys into street life and gangs. The concentration of the disadvantaged and the discontent caused conflict and violence.

The “kitchenette,” described with such verve and lyricism in *12 Million Black Voices*, also serves as a metaphor for racial oppression in much the same way that Du Bois’s “Veil” does in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Indeed, Wright opens *Native Son* with a scene in a cramped kitchenette, where Bigger kills a defiant “huge black rat” and his mother prophesizes that Bigger will meet his fate at “the gallows.”<sup>21</sup> As foreshadowed in this scene, the novel ends with Bigger in jail awaiting his execution. In America, the kitchenette and the jail cell serve essentially the same function—they are instruments of oppression used to isolate and contain a subjugated group and, often, to torture and kill its members.

Those few blacks with resources to buy their own homes faced discrimination and hostility from white homeowners and neighbors. When blacks did manage to move into white neighborhoods, the whites abandoned their homes, which were then sold to blacks by

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<sup>21</sup> Wright, “Native Son,” in *Early Works*, 447-455.

capitalists at exploitative prices. Restrictive covenants were created in white neighborhoods to keep blacks out, forcing most blacks to reside in Black Belt kitchenette apartments. In these restricted black areas, schools were inadequately funded and public services (for example, garbage removal, street lights, pavement repair) were substandard.

Despite these many constraints and obstacles, black men underwent a modernizing acculturation through industrial labor:

“But it is in industry that we encounter experiences that tend to break down the structure of our folk characters and project us toward the vortex of modern urban life. It is when we are handling picks rather than mops, it is when we are swinging hammers rather than brooms, it is when we are pushing levers rather than dust-cloths that we are gripped and influenced by the world-wide forces that shape and mold the life of Western civilization.”<sup>22</sup>

However, black women, restricted as they were to domestic work, tended to be further removed from a modern outlook and way of life. As Wright remarks, “More than even that of the American Indian, the consciousness of vast sections of our black women lies beyond the boundaries of the modern world, though they live and work in that world daily” (135). Black women were also, Wright claimed, more attached to the church, as it was one of the few arenas available to them for self-expression and emotional release. Black women were more severely oppressed than black men, as sexism, along with racism and class exploitation, left them “triply anchored and restricted in their movements within and without the Black Belts” (131).

Notwithstanding this bleak diagnosis of the black condition in America, Wright did not embrace black nationalism in any of its familiar forms. He did not endorse the program of self-determination in a sovereign territory within the American South, as many of his

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<sup>22</sup> Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 117.

communist comrades, like Harry Haywood, advocated.<sup>23</sup> He accepted neither solidarity among the “darker races” of the world as a united front against white supremacy nor socioeconomic cooperation between the black elite and the black working class, two positions W. E. B. Du Bois had defended.<sup>24</sup> Wright also rejected Marcus Garvey’s “Back-to-Africa” scheme, which Wright regarded as embodying a “totally racialistic outlook.”<sup>25</sup> The goal of building a black nation-state in Africa was not feasible, both because Africa was in the tight grip of European colonial powers and because there was an unbridgeable cultural divide between blacks of the diaspora (who are Western, modern, proletarian) and African natives (who are pagan, primitive, peasants).

Wright was well aware that the black masses were sometimes attracted to black nationalist ideas. But he maintained that black people’s distinctive and largely separate way of life was not freely chosen but a response to white supremacy and Jim Crow. Blacks don’t want to live separately, and they don’t want to submit to white power either. So they have built up institutions to enable their survival and to allow outlets for self-expression. While black life and institutions were, in many ways, inadequate and truncated, black progress had to be sought through them. Wright didn’t think black intellectuals should embrace black nationalism, though. They had to understand it and, to some extent, participate in its practices. But the goal is to *transform* nationalist thinking and practice into revolutionary thought and militant collective action. Black nationalism is, at best, a necessary starting point (and a deeply flawed one), not the destination.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Harry Haywood, *Negro liberation* (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1976).

<sup>24</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1984).

<sup>25</sup> Wright, “Black Boy (American Hunger),” in *Later Works*, 273.

<sup>26</sup> This interpretation of Wright’s engagement with black nationalism differs from that offered in Robinson, *Black Marxism*, chap. 11. Robinson describes Wright’s intellectual journey as one that “took him from Marxism, and through Existentialism, and finally to Black nationalism” (p. 289). He sees Wright as ultimately committed

Wright was convinced that the Great Depression had created new opportunities for interracial working-class unity. Slowly, white and black workers were coming to see their common interests. White workers had been rendered destitute, and their only hope against the capitalist classes was to admit blacks to their unions and labor organizations, which they ultimately did. Black workers came to overcome their fear of white capitalists, standing up to them in defiance, and became more trusting of white workers. The key to this change was the modernizing force of industrial life, which caused the withering away of a backward feudal culture: “In this way we encountered for the first time in our lives the full effect of those forces that tended to reshape our folk consciousness, and a few of us stepped forth and accepted within the confines of our personalities the death of our old folk lives, an acceptance of a death that enabled us to cross class and racial lines, a death that made us free.”<sup>27</sup> Blacks had to travel the path of Western civilization—from a primitive semi-feudal existence to modern industrial life—but with tremendous speed and, tragically, through force.<sup>28</sup> Having become agents of “conscious history,” the black masses were ready to take their place along side white workers in the collective project of creating a shared life on American soil on terms of freedom and equality.

Sometime during the 1940’s, however, Wright soured on the Communist program, a disillusionment that he described in detail in the second part of his memoir *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*), which was published in full only after his death. Initially, he seems to have seen his vocation as a revolutionary artist who would help the Communists understand the inner life of common black folk and learn to speak a language the black masses could relate

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to revolutionary black nationalism, a synthesis of Marxism and black nationalism. As a reading of Wright’s “Blueprint” essay, Robinson’s interpretation has some textual basis (though even in that early essay Wright speaks of black nationalism as something to be “transcended”), but it doesn’t fit Wright’s later writings, not even *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*) (1945).

<sup>27</sup> Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 144.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

to and to build trust among black people in the communists' program.<sup>29</sup> The "glory" of communism, its greatest virtue, is its welding of diverse peoples, across lines of race and nationality, into a unified revolutionary force.<sup>30</sup> But where there is solidarity, there is the ever-present threat of betrayal—the worry that a would-be comrade is actually a traitor to the cause. And the communists did not have the wisdom to distinguish friend from foe. This ignorance and suspicion, combined with intolerance for independent thinking and fear of new ideas, was the "horror" of party life, and Wright found it unbearable, in part because he was frequently its victim.

The Marxist theory of history, with its emphasis on the explanatory power of material conditions, got many things right. But, so Wright thought, it failed to appreciate the socio-psychological dimensions of historical development. The labor movement mistakenly regarded the Negro problem as simply one of economic exploitation and class conflict. But there are racial and cultural dimensions to this problem, and some dimensions of the problem are peculiar to the American context. In the introductory essay to St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's *Black Metropolis*, Wright claimed that America is divided by "a war of impulses."<sup>31</sup> On the one hand, it is committed to reason and freedom as universal values, but on the other hand, it is committed to the irrational belief in white domination over "inferior" peoples. These two impulses cannot be consistently reconciled. The invention of the ideology of black inferiority to justify slavery and segregation in a world where each individual is supposed to have inherent dignity cannot do the job. This is Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma* argument, which *Black Metropolis* is said to endorse and supplement.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Wright, "Black Boy (American Hunger)," in *Later Works*, 305-306.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 356-357.

<sup>31</sup> Wright, Introduction to *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton (New York: Hartcourt, Brace and Company, 1945), xxi.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, xxix

The break with the feudal order was caused by secularization and industrialization, which all but destroyed traditional kinship bonds and religious worldviews. There resulted a deep loss of meaning and purpose in life, thus causing many to still cling to the obsolete and irrational values of the feudal past, giving rise to a second war of impulses. In other words, Americans were divided within themselves because the meaning of their lives (including its emotional resonance) is rooted in the bygone era of feudalism, which has been crushed under the iron wheels of modern industrialization. This “emotional void” theory is, I believe, an attempt to integrate Weber’s story of modern alienation and disenchantment with Marx’s historical materialism.

Blacks who migrated to urban centers in search of opportunity initially retained the old hope for freedom. But what will happen when they discover that the freedom they seek cannot be realized in a racist capitalist society? Their frustration, their “hopeless hope” as Wright calls it, will either be exploited by fascists and communists or find release in alienated violent rebellion.<sup>33</sup> Wright insists that whites do not understand the realities of Negro life and certainly don’t grasp the inner workings of the black mind (which is shaped by repression and its symptoms), and so they will be surprised by blacks’ violent responses to their plight, even as riots are already happening.

Ultimately, Wright decided to leave the United States and to make his home in France. In the revealing essay “I Choose Exile,” written for the magazine *Ebony* but never published, he explained the reasons behind his decision to emigrate.<sup>34</sup> The essay is not only a Dear John letter to America but also a *lettre d’amore* to European liberalism. He admits that he desires to escape American racism and segregation, but his main reason for exiting the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., xxvi.

<sup>34</sup> Wright, “I Choose Exile” (unpublished manuscript, 1951).

American scene is that he believes Europeans value the individual above money and respect individual liberty. He complains that in America the capitalist ethos dominates the whole of life, marginalizing all other motives and ways of living; and despite the country's high-minded constitutional principles, it does not respect freedom or tolerate difference. The essay strikes a pessimistic, even defeatist, note about the future of blacks in America: "My first week in Paris taught me that the fight I had made back home for Negro rights was right, but somehow futile. The deep contrast between French and American racial attitudes demonstrated that it was barbarousness that incited such militant racism in white Americans."

### 3. *Native Son* and the meaning of "Bigger"

How much (if any) of Max's courtroom speech can be attributed to Wright?<sup>35</sup> Does it express his moral and political outlook or social philosophy? What is the political significance of his most famous literary character? These are difficult questions that have only controversial answers, and I lack the space to offer a detailed interpretation of the political lessons of *Native Son*. But given the high place of that novel in black letters, some discussion is in order.

First, it is worth noting that many of the claims Max makes in his lengthy courtroom oration can be found in some of Wright's non-fiction works. For example, Max declares his courtroom plea to have significance for the future of the nation as a whole, not just for Bigger or the Negro people (803). Bigger is a symbol for a complex set of social forces, a social pathology at the heart of US life (804). Wright repeats such claims in his introduction to *Black Metropolis*, where he asserts, "there is a problem facing us, a bigger one than even that of the Negro, a problem of which the Negro problem is a small but a highly

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<sup>35</sup> See Wright, "Native Son," in *Early Works*, 803-826.

symbolically important part” (xxi). Max also explicitly endorses Wright’s explanation of the fall of slavery in *12 Million Black Voices*: “the invention and widespread use of machines made the further direct enslavement of men economically impossible, and so slavery ended” (810). And Max does not depart from Wright’s views when he suggests that, because of the repression of resentment and loss of hope, more violence of the sort that Bigger committed can be expected, and if drastic measures aren’t taken soon, mass violence will erupt that will threaten Western civilization itself (823). With claims such as these, where Max’s argument supports statements that Wright makes in his own voice elsewhere, we have some reason to attribute these arguments to Wright himself.

Second, there is of course Bigger Thomas, the main character of the novel, who also expresses, in his own way, positions that Wright has defended elsewhere. For instance, one cannot fail to notice that Bigger’s attitudes toward religion can be found in Wright’s non-fiction work. There are several striking scenes about Christianity to be found in *Native Son*. Despite facing the death penalty and his mother’s desperate pleas for him to turn to God, Bigger denies the existence of a deity, the efficacy of prayer, the reality of “souls,” and the existence of life after death (724-726, 778-779). When Max asks Bigger why he didn’t seek a sense of “home” in black churches, he replies, “I wanted to be happy in this world, not out of it. I didn’t want that kind of happiness. The white folks like for us to be religious, then they can do what they want to with us” (778). In another scene, Bigger symbolically rejects the call of the Christian gospel by angrily throwing away a necklace with a cross charm three times (760-763). And if the point wasn’t already clear, Bigger tosses hot coffee in the face of a white priest who had come to pray with him after he’d been sentenced to death and, as a result of this aggressive action, feels a sense of self-worth for having refused “the consolations of religion” (839).

Less than two weeks after the publication of *Native Son*, Wright delivered a lecture at Columbia University titled “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” which was included as an essay in future printings of the novel.<sup>36</sup> Wright explains that Bigger Thomas represented a personality type that he knew well from his time growing up in Mississippi and his early adult life in Chicago. There are, he insists, millions of “Biggers,” some black, some white. To give a concrete sense of the type he has in mind, Wright describes five Biggers he had known. Biggers are “bad,” violent, and unremorseful. Full of resentment, their violence can be directed toward the oppressor or the oppressed (consider Bigger’s murder of Bessie). Refusing to live without the things the privileged possess, Biggers take what they want without regard to whether their actions are right or wrong. They are not afraid of conflict, not even violent confrontation, and are willing to risk their lives to satisfy their desires. Biggers are willing, even eager, to break the rules and prepared to suffer the consequences. But they are also, Wright notes, prone to depression and mental illness. And their lives typically come to a violent end. Despite this grim characterization, Wright confesses that he identifies with the Bigger type (874) and that he secretly desires to act like a Bigger but is too timid to do so (855). And, importantly, he emphasizes that the only acts of rebellion he ever saw from blacks in the South were carried out by Bigger Thomases (859).

Wright is concerned to explain that Biggers are not naturally “bad” but are creatures of their environment (857-859). They live in a segregated world, deprived of political and economic power, and humiliated by Jim Crow prohibitions and taboos. They are not permitted to acquire a decent education and are prevented from occupying good jobs or honorable public roles. A reigning ideology of white supremacy is used against them to justify retaliation for breaking the regime’s rules. All these practices are instruments for

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<sup>36</sup> Wright, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” in *Early Works*, 851-881.

keeping blacks “in their place”—subordinated to whites. Some blacks adapted to these oppressive circumstances through religion. However, the Biggers, having rejected the “compensatory nourishment” of religion and frustrated at being denied the benefits of modern industrial life, could only revolt.

Max also voices this point of view in his courtroom defense of Bigger Thomas. He explains that hate and fear have been molded into the consciousness of Bigger by white civilization. In search of some way to express these emotions, he and others like him are in a constant state of spontaneous protest even rebellion.<sup>37</sup> He insists that killing a person like Bigger will not make whites any safer or stamp out the way of life he represents. Killing Bigger or others like him will only tighten the grip of oppression, unleashing an even longer and less controllable violent response (812-813). Max argues that religion, gambling, and sex function as truncated modes of escape from the crushing force of oppression, redirecting rebellious energy. Otherwise there would be many more like Bigger (815). A refrain in the speech is that the oppressed resent that their interests are treated as unimportant and that they are denied the opportunities others have to pursue their ambitions. The memorable phrase used is “the resentful millions” (826).

The plot of *Native Son*, according to Wright, is simply the story of what made Bigger who he is and the significance of this social type.<sup>38</sup> He insists that “from start to finish, [*Native Son*] was Bigger’s story, Bigger’s fear, Bigger’s flight, and Bigger’s fate that I tried to depict” (878). But he wouldn’t have gone to the trouble to write Bigger’s story if he were not “a meaningful and prophetic symbol” (860). Jim Crow is just a component of a larger oppressive system—capitalism. And the solution is not black nationalism but interracial anti-

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<sup>37</sup> Wright, “Native Son,” in *Early Works*, 821.

<sup>38</sup> Wright, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” in *Early Works*, 874.

capitalist solidarity. Wright tells us, “I am not saying that I heard any talk of revolution in the South when I was a kid there. But I did hear the lispings, the whispers, the mutters which some day, under one stimulus or another, will surely grow into open revolt unless the conditions which produce Bigger Thomases are changed” (864).

Surprisingly, Wright says almost nothing in “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” about the character Max. He mentions that “the lawyer’s speech” and Max’s presence in Bigger’s cell at the end of the novel were examples of his showing what others thought of Bigger (878, 880). Yet he maintains, “throughout there is but one point of view: Bigger’s” (879). However, I don’t see how he can explain the symbolic meaning of Bigger, his broader political significance, if limited to only Bigger’s standpoint. Bigger is inarticulate and grasps his situation only dimly and intuitively. He certainly doesn’t understand the broader historical significance of his “type.” Moreover, Wright claims that he became aware of Bigger’s symbolic significance only after he was familiar with the labor movement and its philosophy (860). Bigger doesn’t join the labor movement (despite Jan’s attempt to recruit him) and doesn’t understand its program, so he can’t express its point of view. In fact, Bigger doesn’t even comprehend Max’s speech, though “he had felt the meaning of some of it from the tone of Max’s voice” (826). So it seems that Max is absolutely crucial to the fulfillment of Wright’s stated literary ambitions.

If Wright’s political philosophy can be discerned through a reading of *Native Son*, it will likely be discovered only through an examination of both Bigger and Max and, crucially, of the interplay between them. Indeed, the speech Max gives must be understood in light of his prior prison cell conversation with Bigger (767-781). Max puts a battery of questions to Bigger, listens carefully to Bigger’s responses, and promises to tell the judge how Bigger feels and why he feels that way (780). His speech draws heavily from what Bigger says (though it

goes far beyond Bigger's remarks). Moreover, Bigger feels strongly that Max was really listening to him and understood his feelings: "He knew that Max was seeking facts to tell the judge; but in Max's asking of those questions he had felt a recognition of his life, of his feelings, of his person that he had never encountered before" (782). As a result of this conversation, Bigger comes to have a "new sense of the value of himself" (783). We might therefore be able to glean Wright's political outlook from Bigger's emerging higher consciousness and Max's social theory. Combined we get an account of individual self-affirmation and freedom through justified rebellion (from Bigger) and a theory of modern social development and its socio-psychological consequences (from Max).

#### 4. Colonialism and Its Consequences

By the time Wright composes *Black Power* (a travel-writing treatment of Nkrumah's Ghana), his break from communism would appear to be complete. He says there that he rejects the aims of communism because communism does not respect individual freedom.<sup>39</sup>

Communism, at its best, is the realization of Western ideals, particularly its ideals of justice, which the Western world has mostly abandoned and never consistently practiced (10-11). But communism too often devolves into nothing more than the will to power. He continues to use Marxist analysis to interpret modern history and Africa's place within it, but he no longer wants to be understood as endorsing Marxist practical philosophy (12). Indeed, as with his treatment of the Negro in America in *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright takes up the condition of colonized peoples of the "Third World" against the background of a theory of

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<sup>39</sup> Wright, "Black Power," in *Black Power: Three Books from Exile*, 9-10.

history of broadly Marxist provenance.<sup>40</sup>

For Wright, colonialism is, in essence, about maintaining labor discipline, resource extraction, and keeping the native population economically dependent on European powers: “A colony, therefore, became a vast geographical prison whose inmates were presumably sentenced for all time to suffer the exploitation of their human, agricultural, and mineral resources.”<sup>41</sup> Yet, as with the subjugation of blacks in America, colonialism in Africa and Asia also brings in its wake far-reaching cultural and psychological consequences.

For instance, in *White Man, Listen!*, Wright insists that “white Western Christian civilization” destroyed the traditional cultures of African and Asian peoples, a social condition to which these peoples are struggling to adjust.<sup>42</sup> European imperial encroachments in Africa and Asia created a “spiritual void” in the lives of the people, a deep and passionate longing for meaning (688-691). Imperialism is not only exploitation and theft of resources and land; it also robs the natives of the meaning-making beliefs and practices that they have long relied on to make sense of their lives.

Europeans justified their domination over Africans and Asians with racist ideology, thereby fostering irrational racial consciousness among these peoples. Wright claims to know that, from a scientific point of view, there are no races (667). Biology is not what matters, though. Talk of “the white man” has meaning from a historical or sociological point of view.

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<sup>40</sup> I agree with John Reilly’s statement that “in his non-fiction beginning with *Black Power* and continuing through *The Color Curtain* and *White Man, Listen!* Richard Wright undertook an adaptation of conventions that eventually converted journalism into a vehicle for a theory of contemporary reality inspired by a vision of a new people entering history.” See John M. Reilly, “Richard Wright and the Art of Non-Fiction: Stepping Out on the Stage of the World,” in *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), 416. But I do not accept Reilly’s claim that the method Wright relies on in these works is autobiography, as the basic elements of historical materialism continue to be salient.

<sup>41</sup> Wright, “Black Power,” in *Black Power: Three Books from Exile*, 27.

<sup>42</sup> Wright, “White Man, Listen!,” in *Black Power*, 651-653.

“Race” is an issue for Asian and African peoples because some Europeans stake their claim to colored peoples’ resources, land, and labor on the superiority of “whiteness” (667).

In *The Color Curtain* (a quasi-journalistic report on the 1955 African-Asian unity conference in Bandung), Wright provides a brief but fascinating discussion of the consequences of racism.<sup>43</sup> It begins with an anecdote about how an Indonesian official, noticing that Wright was black, gave him preference over a white journalist when issuing press passes. Wright insists that this was “racism” and compares it to the Jim Crow racism that he had experienced in the American South. He found it disturbing and “loathsome,” even “evil.” But his point here was not to condemn or excuse it. He was interested in how easy it is to adopt racism or tacitly accept it when one is advantaged by it. And he worried that if the non-white nations embraced it uncritically, they would become a menacing force in the world.

He also emphasizes that whites had created racism as an instrument of subjugation, and Asians and Africans learned it from their oppressors. He expects Asians and Africans—particularly the uneducated and fearful among them—to practice racism against whites. Whites initiated racial consciousness, a socio-psychological process several centuries old. It presently constitutes a tradition in its own right. And the fact that many whites now reject or regret it will not make it disappear.

In a Freudian twist to the usual Marxist-Leninist story of modern imperialism, Wright claims that Europeans, freed of the restraining force of tradition, were in search of a place where they could feed their repressed libidinal desires. They found this in Africa and Asia:

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<sup>43</sup> Wright, “The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference,” in *Black Power*, 519-521.

“Living in a waking dream, generations of emotionally impoverished colonial European whites wallowed in the quick gratification of greed, reveled in the cheap superiority of racial domination, slaked their sensual thirst in illicit sexuality, draining off the damned-up libido that European morality had condemned, amassing through trade a vast reservoir of economic fat, thereby establishing vast accumulations of capital which spurred the industrialization of the West” (654-655).

And yet when modern Western man looks at Africa, he also sees himself—and he hates what he sees.<sup>44</sup> This self-loathing, a projection of his soul onto Africa, makes him want to destroy the continent, as personal vindication.

However, Wright’s most insightful (if speculative) and extended commentary on the condition of Africans and Asians concerns how the combination of racism and colonialism affected the psychology of the oppressed. He claims that non-white peoples are often ashamed of physical features that make them look different from whites—especially their skin color and hair texture—and they are ashamed of the fact that they are ashamed.<sup>45</sup> Colored nations also measure their social progress in terms of how close or far way they are to Western nations, which also makes them feel inferior, as does the inability to fully identify with either Western culture or their native traditions.<sup>46</sup> Colored peoples see and feel Europeans and their descendants, no matter the differences between them, as part of an indivisible white collective agent.<sup>47</sup> They conceptualize time in terms of *before* and *after* the White Man came (660-661). They hate talk of natives “evolving” toward civilization, for it suggests that they may never quite measure up, and they hate how some whites romanticize “primitive” life among colored peoples (663-664). There is a general suspicion that whites don’t want Asians and Africans to “catch up” with them, a sense that whites are secretly

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<sup>44</sup> Wright, “Black Power,” in *Black Power*, 197.

<sup>45</sup> Wright, “The Color Curtain,” in *Black Power*, 578-581.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 584.

<sup>47</sup> Wright, “White Man, Listen!,” in *Black Power*, 658-660.

attempting to block racial parity in a “racial” race to the top (665-666).

These effects of racial consciousness, Wright believed, were tragic, a distortion of human personality. He did not, however, blame people of color for being slow to overcome them. And he didn’t think whites had the standing to blame colored people for not having recovered from them. The time when truly human relations beyond race are widespread would likely take awhile to reach us, if it ever does.<sup>48</sup>

Wright felt a sense of solidarity with African and Asian peoples. But in identifying with the darker peoples of the globe, he sought to avoid reifying “race.” For example, in Wright’s speech (which Kwame Nkrumah invited him to give) at the Convention People’s Party rally in what was then the Gold Coast, he said: “I’m one of the lost sons of Africa who has come back to look upon the land of his forefathers. In a superficial sense it may be said that I’m a stranger to most of you, but, in terms of common heritage of suffering and hunger for freedom, your heart and my heart beat as one.”<sup>49</sup> Wright doesn’t fall back on racial identity here but rather notes the common experience of European domination and exploitation connecting blacks of the diaspora with blacks on the continent. Moreover, he does not appear to embrace Pan-Africanism, at least not as a set of basic principles. After his visit to Ghana, Wright wrote to Nkrumah, “I felt an odd kind of at-homeness, a solidarity that stemmed not from ties of blood or race, or from my being of African descent, but from the quality of deep hope and suffering embedded in the lives of your people, from the hard facts of oppression that cut across time, space, and culture.”<sup>50</sup>

Despite Wright’s distaste for both religious belief and racial consciousness, he believed that the full and permanent emancipation of colonized peoples would and should

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<sup>48</sup> Wright, “The Color Curtain,” in *Black Power*, 586.

<sup>49</sup> Wright, “Black Power,” in *Black Power*, 102.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 410.

rely on these ideas and sentiments. He argues that African and Asian elites, educated in the West, who come to lead the national liberation movements in their native homelands inevitably fuse indigenous religion with nationalism to mobilize, organize, and direct the masses to their freedom.<sup>51</sup> In a bit of demagoguery, race and religion are exploited because the ideas of individual liberty and self-redemption associated with the West do not yet have appeal to the African and Asian masses. Though romantic racial nationalism must ultimately be transcended, nationalism in Africa and Asia can help to bring about industrialization.<sup>52</sup>

Wright argues that Africans cannot pass from the traditional to the modern until the “African personality” embodies a new *Weltanschauung*. A psychological shift must occur that is even more important than economic modernization. This change will not come about through Western influence (or if it does, it will come at the cost of economic dependence) but must be accomplished by Africans themselves under stern leadership and rapidly (410-411). This means, at a minimum, breaking down the hierarchical tribal kinship system and eliminating religious “mumbo-jumbo” (415). Wright seems to have thought that gradual modernization under democratic rule would take so long that other reactionary elements could undercut progressive movement and draw out the inevitable suffering. Or the communists would take hold, bringing Africa under a different type of European rule. Instead, he notoriously advocated *forced and rapid industrialization under strict social discipline*, what he calls a “militarization of African life” (417).

Wright maintained that Asian and African elites recognize that, to stave off re-colonization or to avoid incorporation into the Soviet Union, they would ultimately have to break the grip that tradition and religion held over their people. But they were reluctant to

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 280-288; “The Color Curtain,” in *Black Power*, 541-542.

<sup>52</sup> Wright, “Black Power,” in *Black Power*, 77.

use the necessary methods (which would likely include something akin to dictatorship), for they thought this would be tantamount to fascism.<sup>53</sup> But Wright believed they must overcome this hesitancy, for pragmatism demands it.<sup>54</sup>

He emphasized that not every oppressed person of color has a “mangled” personality.<sup>55</sup> Some, “a minority of minorities,” manage to cultivate a cosmopolitan, post-traditional, and scientific outlook. They don’t divide the world into races, classes, religions, or nations. They see the commonality in all humankind and regard the earth as belonging to us all, with no social group having its assigned continent, regardless of the group’s ancestral origins. This attitude is found mostly among Asian and African artists and intellectuals, many of whom have been educated in the West. It also exists among the Asian and African elite leadership (e.g., Nkrumah, Nasser, and Nehru). The West must therefore not attempt to overthrow or delegitimize these leaders, for they are the only hope for a peaceful, just, and cosmopolitan future.

Indeed, Wright would demand much more from the West. The communiqué document from the Bandung conference was implicitly addressed to the West. It was a kind of Jeremiad, “A LAST CALL OF WESTERNIZED ASIANS TO THE MORAL CONSCIENCE OF THE WEST!”<sup>56</sup> Wright expressed the hope that this call would be heeded, that it would usher in a “de-Occidentalization” of humanity. On this vision—which is fundamentally economic rather than “racial”—the earth’s resources and technical know-how are to be fairly shared across nations and colored nations are not made dependent for their material health on the West. But, he hastens to add, this would naturally mean that the

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<sup>53</sup> Wright, “White Man, Listen!” in *Black Power*, 684.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 684-687.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 678-681.

<sup>56</sup> Wright, “The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference,” in *Black Power*, 593.

average white Westerner would have to adjust to a lower standard of living, for they would no longer be able to live on the forced sacrifices of the rest of the world.

However, Wright did not believe that such a program of economic justice would be sufficient to solve the cultural problems of Asia and Africa (596-597). Widespread ignorance, irrationality, and superstition, particularly dangerous religious and racial passions, would remain, retarding social progress and posing a threat to the West. He therefore contended that these remnants of pre-modern and colonial life must be swept away, and that this urgently needed reform would inevitably involve Western interference in industrializing those they formerly exploited (600-606).

Wright was convinced that there were parts of the Western world that were grounded in a secular and scientific outlook. It is this rational perspective on life that makes it permissible, according to Wright, for the West to interfere with the development of Africa and Asia. Because the African and Asian elites have been educated in the West, they too share this rational outlook. Wright imagines an alliance between the progressive forces in the Western world and the African and Asian elite that would speedily drive out racial and religious attitudes and customs. He suggested that if the West will not play this role, then the Communist will do so, with all the terrible losses of freedom that this entailed in Russia (607-609).

Europe must acknowledge its role in creating these problems and accept its responsibility to aid in correcting them (697). The African and Asian elite must not be left to go it alone. In a striking and revealing passage, Wright emphasizes that the world has inherited from Europe many good things but also many evil things: "Europe must be big enough to accept its Descartes and its Cortés and what they did. Europe must be big enough to accept its Hume of England and its Leopold II of Belgium and what they did. It must

possess enough stern responsibility to accept both its Goethe and its Hitler” (697). While acknowledging that the white West should offer Africa industrial techniques, machinery, gifts, and loans, Wright thought that one of the most important things the Western powers could do for Africa is accept responsibility for all the wrong they did and the havoc they caused. This public and sincere acknowledgment would provide assurance that they won’t attempt to colonize Africa again, removing much anxiety among African peoples. The African elite could then modernize their societies without worrying about threats from the white West.<sup>57</sup>

Wright never waived in his opinion that European imperialism was exploitative, brutal, and wrong. But he thought an unintended beneficial consequence of colonialism was that it put in motion the destruction of the irrational religious and traditional values and practices of Africa and Asia (718-722). This process would ultimately be liberating. But the Europeans left a void that they did not and could not fill. This emptiness is to be filled by Western-educated Asian and African elites, who are in many ways more Western than Western whites. They are the bridge between East and West; they are the agents who must act to create one rational world. And the white West must aid them in their efforts by giving them “carte blanche” to use whatever methods, including “quasi-dictatorial” ones, that are necessary to modernize their nations (725).

## 5. Realizing Western Ideals

Wright regarded himself as “much more the diagnostician than the scribbler of prescriptions”; as he says, “I’m no Moses.”<sup>58</sup> This is a fair self-assessment. Yet there are basic

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<sup>57</sup> Wright, “White Man, Listen!,” in *Black Power*, 810.

<sup>58</sup> Wright, “White Man, Listen!,” in *Black Power*, 646.

ideals that structure his political thought, ideals that Wright associated with Western modernity. Modernization in the West is not just a set of social processes that mark the break from European feudalism to liberal capitalism. It is a normative framework and institutional arrangement, a schema of fundamental values and a mode of social organization.

Among these values is a secular worldview that denies the power of magic and maintains a strict separation of Church and State. In *Pagan Spain*, Wright argues that Spain is not really a part of “the West” despite the fact that it is in Europe and despite outward appearances to the contrary.<sup>59</sup> In fact, in his estimation Spain wasn’t even a Christian nation but remained mired in its pagan past. The fundamental trouble with Spain, according Wright, is that it had not gone through a process of secularization. It had retained its deeply irrational religious consciousness and this thoroughly structures Spanish social life. Rather than a human invention to secure liberty and to advance the common good even the *State* is viewed as sacred. This, for Wright, is a sign of backwardness. Moreover, he condemns the lack of religious freedom and the failure to separate Church and State, and he even compares the condition of Protestants under the Catholic Church to the oppression of blacks under Jim Crow [citation].

Closely connected to secularization is a scientific and non-metaphysical worldview.<sup>60</sup> There are no occult forces that escape the causal nexus or the laws of nature. Science is the highest expression of human rationality and intelligence, and it should be the epistemic basis on which we formulate our beliefs about our environment and ourselves. A scientific worldview fosters a spirit of pragmatism, a healthy fallibilism and a willingness to rely on the method of trial and error to make progress. Science also gives us both the know how to

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<sup>59</sup> Wright, *Pagan Spain* (Jackson: Banner Books, 1995), 228-229. Originally published in 1957.

<sup>60</sup> Wright, “White Man, Listen!,” in *Black Power*, 708-709.

maintain and improve human health (including mental health) and the technology to control our environment, making it serviceable to our needs.

Wright vehemently opposed capitalism, finding it exploitative and wasteful, and he thought it appealed to our basest instincts—greed, selfishness, and materialism. But he strongly favored industrialization. Machine-based production not only saves time and labor (a practical application of science that creates more efficient means for meeting human needs), but it shapes human personality in a progressive direction, breaking down the reactionary forces of tradition that cause degrading forms of stasis. Industrialization includes the necessary training to use complex technology and the cultivation of habits and dispositions that allow individuals to meet the dynamic demands of urban life.

A rational society, according to Wright, includes centralized government: “A central government is an absolute necessity if man is to live at all rationally. How can you trade with nations of the world, how can you educate your children, how can you wipe out disease, how can you defend yourself against aggression unless you have a strong central government?”<sup>61</sup> A crucial function of government is to ensure mass education and spread literacy, which are bulwarks against demagoguery and communism.<sup>62</sup> Without an educated public, democratic governance is unworkable and fascism is an ever-present threat.

Wright was deeply committed to the liberal values of individual freedom, tolerance, and individualism: “I hold human freedom as a supreme right and good for all men, my conception of freedom being the right of all men to exercise their natural and acquired powers as long as the exercise of those powers does not hinder others from doing the

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<sup>61</sup> Wright, “Black Power,” in *Black Power*, 274.

<sup>62</sup> Wright, “White Man, Listen!,” in *Black Power*, 701-702.

same.”<sup>63</sup> There should be freedom of thought and expression without restriction from State or Church. Wright maintained that human life had inherent dignity and value apart from any religious mandate.<sup>64</sup> Respect and concern for the individual, he insisted, should be the highest value, compromised only under extreme circumstances.<sup>65</sup> Even his opposition to racial prejudice, discrimination, and segregation was based as much on the ways they wrongly restrict individual freedom as on their irrationality and insult.<sup>66</sup>

It is not sufficient that the ideals of Western modernity be realized in social institutions and public rules. They must also be embodied in human personality and individual outlook. Wright believed himself to be a modern Western man in search of a rational and free society. His own self-understanding as a civilized Western person therefore gives us another window into his normative perspective.

Wright has a self-conception as a rational, raceless, freedom-loving, and cosmopolitan individual: “I have no religion in the formal sense of the word... I have no race except that which is forced upon me. I have no country except that to which I’m obliged to belong. I have no traditions. I’m free. I have only the future.”<sup>67</sup> Part of Wright’s self-understanding as a rational person is constituted by his commitment to a scientific worldview, one that includes the social sciences and psychology. As he says, “it was not until I stumbled upon science that I discovered some of the meanings of the environment that battered and taunted me.”<sup>68</sup> And in his work he sought to fuse the insights of scientific study and artistic imagination.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 709.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 708-709.

<sup>65</sup> Wright, “I Choose Exile” (unpublished manuscript, 1951).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Wright, *Pagan Spain*, 21.

<sup>68</sup> Wright, Introduction to *Black Metropolis*, xvii.

The other dimension of Wright's view of himself as "rational" is his abiding rejection of religion and superstition, a theme he pursues, in various ways, in all his published books, fiction and non-fiction. He describes himself as "areligious," that is, without religious belief.<sup>69</sup> But his opposition to religion is about more than being a rational person. It is a manifestation of his love of freedom: "I refuse to make a religion out of that which I do not know. I too can feel the limit of my reactions, can feel where my puny self ends, can savor the terror of it; but it does not make me want to impose that sense of my terror on others, or rear it into a compulsive system."<sup>70</sup> Like communism and fascism, religion is an expression of the desire to dominate: "Wherever I found religion in my life I found strife, the attempt of one individual or group to rule another in the name of God. The naked will to power seemed always to walk in the wake of a hymn."<sup>71</sup> Indeed, Wright's love of freedom is so profound that he insists that "unless I feel free to let my instincts range, free to come and go as I please, free to probe and examine my environment, I languish, I wither, I die."<sup>72</sup>

Finally, Wright considers himself a citizen of the world, at home on any part of the globe and capable of connecting with people of diverse national backgrounds. He describes himself as "rootless," as not in need of many emotional attachments and allegiances.<sup>73</sup> Being alone in the world, he believes, is natural, and he's at peace with it. It is an inescapable feature of the human condition that he embraces. [Maybe a word or two here about Wright's existentialism.]

## 6. Conclusion

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<sup>69</sup> Wright, "Black Power," in *Black Power*, 168.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>71</sup> Wright, "Black Boy (American Hunger)," in *Richard Wright: Later Works*, 130.

<sup>72</sup> Wright, "I Choose Exile" (unpublished manuscript, 1951).

<sup>73</sup> Wright, "White Man, Listen!," in *Black Power*, 647.

[Still to come...]