

# BEDTIME

# RADICALISM

## **GRAMSCI'S BLACK MARX**

WHITHER THE SLAVE  
IN CIVIL SOCIETY?



FRANK WILDERSON, III

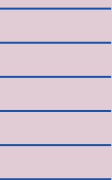
Written by Slim Philomath  
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# HOW ABOUT THE COWS: A LOOK INTO FRANK WILDERSON'S GRAMSCI'S BLACK MARX: WHITHER THE SLAVE IN CIVIL SOCIETY?

SLIM PHILOMATH



A little over a year ago, I met with my childhood friend to catch up. During our conversations we both knew that our lives have moved in different trajectories, however, our friendship always remained intact. As we sat outside on the back porch, we reminisced about past high school fights, love interests, and our lackluster finances. With us were two mutual friends, and as we continued to talk, the topic of wages came up. Then my childhood friend started to breakdown how we as workers do not receive a proper wage for our labor. I would have thought that at that moment he transfigured into Engels himself because in all my years of knowing my friend never did I hear him hint at anything that radical. It was too dark outside for him to see the astonishment on my face, but he could tell. He described how one person he worked with introduced him to different readings and videos about Marxism. The disillusionment he felt from living in ignorance made him fervent to push for a revolution. Before that conversation I never understood him to be committed to any type of politics. I mean he was “outraged” about the killing of Trayvon Martin and even more recently he helped organize a protest after the killing of George Floyd, yet the thought of being able to converse about radical topics was inviting. And that’s exactly what we did. We would both bounce ideas off the other as we tried to make sense of our existence in America. His newfound fervor was encouraging to me because years of critical work is sometimes lonely because you are constantly met with antagonism but now one of my best friends speaks the same language as me. However, the more I talked to him the more I realized that, although our ideologies were adjacent, they were not in perfect alignment.



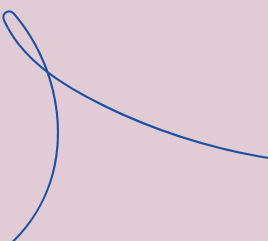
I noticed that his guiding motives were in the redistribution of power and the proletariat eating the rich. There was a certain ring to it that made it sound enticing, yet considering we are both Black males, one paper I read in my early undergrad studies kept popping into my mind: Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?

In this paper, Frank Wilderson III critically analyzes how the Black subject distorts, expands, and ultimately threatens the Gramscian- Marxist categories of "work, progress, production, exploitation, hegemony, and historical self-awareness", throwing a wrench in the Gramscian Dream (225). Wilderson unflinchingly illustrates what this dream means for the Black subject that does not align within the hierarchal structure of proletariat and bourgeoisie.

He first does this through analyzing what exactly Gramsci's "War of Positions" means. Wilderson utilizes Ann Sassoon's 1985 work Approaches to Gramsci to define the War of Positions as the "agitating within civil society in a 'revolutionary movement' that builds 'qualitatively new social relationships'" (226). This again sounds enticing to the average reader, however, the key word in this definition is "within". Therefore, it is within the current civil society that Gramsci believes the worker can attain a fair wage thus implying that it is not society itself that is the problem but rather the people who are at the top of society (the bourgeoisie). Therefore, according to Gramsci, society can be reformed as evidenced by Wilderson quoting J Buttigieg's 1971 work 'Gramsci on Civil Society':

*[Gramsci's] purpose is not to repress civil society or to restrict its space but rather to develop a revolutionary strategy (a 'war of position') that would be employed precisely in the arena of civil society, with the aim of disabling the coercive apparatus of the state, gaining access to political power, and creating the conditions that could give rise to a consensual society wherein no individual or group is reduced to a subaltern. (Buttigieg, 1995, p. 7)*

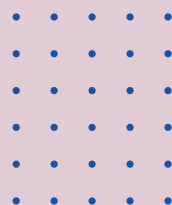




This makes sense for those that are subjects in society (white people) and thus have the potential to move throughout the hierarchical structure, as is Gramsci's objective in the War of Positions. However, Gramscian is oddly silent regarding the Black subject who has been historically outside the strata of civil society. Contemporary Gramscians might speak on the behalf of Gramsci by claiming that this flip in power differential will ultimately erase classism, sexism, racism, ableism, and any other "ism" one could imagine, however, Wilderson claims that



Anglo-American Gramscians, like Buttigieg and Sassoon, and US activists in the anti-globalisation movement whose unspoken grammar is predicated on Gramsci's assumptive logic, continue this tradition of unraced positionality which allows them to posit the valency of Wars of Position for blacks and whites alike. They assume that all subjects are positioned in such a way as to have their consent solicited and to be able to extend their consent 'spontaneously'. This is profoundly problematic if only – leaving revolution aside for the moment – at the level of analysis; for it assumes that hegemony with its three constituent elements (influence, leadership, consent) is the modality which must be either inculcated or breached, if one is to either avoid or incur, respectively, the violence of the state. However, one of the primary claims of this essay is that, whereas the consent of black people may seem to be called upon, its withdrawal does not precipitate a 'crisis in authority'. Put another way, the transformation of black people's acquiescent 'common sense' into revolutionary 'good sense' is an extenuating circumstance, but not the catalyst, of State violence against black people. State violence against the black body, as Martinot and Sexton suggest in their introduction, is not contingent, it is structural and, above all, gratuitous.



Wilderson speaks about this violence against the Black body as being ontologically tied to it which is in direct contrast of the force imparted on the worker because for the worker that violence is described as reserved. According to Gramsci, this terror is merely contingent because the proletariat are more influenced through the hegemonic apparatuses of the media, yet disobedience potentially can result in violence. Conversely, for the Black body their very existence is an infringement that results in overwhelming violence. This provides evidence to the claim that Marxism cannot and will not provide an end to anti-Black racism because

*In this regard, the hegemonic advances within civil society by the Left hold out no more possibility for black life than the coercive backlash of political society. What many political theorists have either missed or ignored is that a crisis of authority that might take place by way of a Left expansion of civil society, further instantiates, rather than dismantles, the authority of whiteness. Black death is the modern bourgeois-state's recreational pastime, but the hunting season is not confined to the time (and place) of political society; blacks are fair game as a result of a progressively expanding civil society as well.*

This means that if the proletariat does replace the bourgeoisie, whiteness/ civil society is not deteriorated because Left expansion will always destroy the Black body. But rather it means

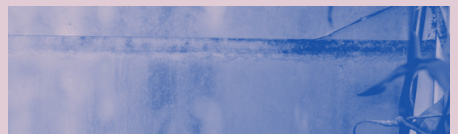
*The worker demands that productivity be fair and democratic (Gramsci's new hegemony, Lenin's dictatorship of the proletariat), the slave, on the other hand, demands that production stop; stop without recourse to its ultimate democratisation. Work is not an organic principle for the slave. The absence of black subjectivity from the crux of marxist discourse is symptomatic of the discourse's inability to cope with the possibility that the generative subject of capitalism, the black body of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the generative subject that resolves late-capital's over-accumulation crisis, the black (incarcerated) body of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, do not reify the basic categories which structure marxist conflict: the categories of work, production, exploitation, historical self-awareness and, above all, hegemony.*

So then, to take a full stop, we can see the ways in which Black people have been left out of the narrative of the Gramscian dream but a question remains as to why must they experience gratuitous violence and death? In a few words, its just a part of it. This implies that the suffering of the Black body is endemic to American social life because for there to be civil society there needs to be uncivil society. Put another way, there needs to be an essential other to affirm an individual's claims to whiteness/ civility. This other is exactly what was found when the Portuguese ships first touched down on the continent of Africa. Despite African peoples being rich in culture, heritage, language, and personality, the African was viewed as an Anthropologic scandal or

*a being without (recognisable) customs, religion, medicine, dietary patterns, culinary habits, sexual mores, means of agriculture, and most significantly, without character – without character because, according to the literature, they did not work. (235)*

Therefore, this perceived lack of anthropologic personhood creates a void in the notions of humanity in which the Black subject can never be recuperated. So going back to the pitfalls of Marxism, this again reveals how the violence that is reserved for the worker is not contingent for the Black body because violence, according to Gramsci is used by the bourgeoisie to exploit unfairly waged workers. This is to say that within the Gramscian- Marxist framework violence is used for economical means, while, violence that Black people face transcend economics. The Black subject as mentioned above is anthropologically outside the strata of civil society. So then where are we within this framework that we deserve such a continuous violence? Wilderson beautifully illustrates this through the metaphor of the meat packing plant:

*For the sake of our scenario – the impact of a successful War of Position on our hypothetical meat packing plant – let us not refer to the question as ‘the negro question’. Instead, let us call it the ‘cow question’. Let us suppose that the superstructure has finally ‘flowered’, and that throughout the various fronts where the power to pose the question held by the private initiatives and associations elaborated by the industrialists, hegemony has now been called into question and a war of position has been transposed into a war of maneuver. The scandal with which the black subject position threatens Gramscian discourse is manifest in the subject’s ontological disarticulation of Gramscian categories: work, progress, production, exploitation, hegemony, and historical self-awareness. Gramsci’s notes on ‘Americanism and Fordism’ demonstrate his acumen in expressing how the drama of value is played out in civil society (i.e. the family) away from the slaughter house, while being imbricated and foundational to the class exploitation which workers experience within the slaughter house. But still we must ask, what about the cows? The cows are not being exploited, they are being accumulated and, if need be, killed. (233)*



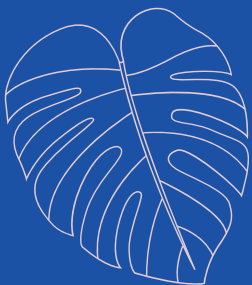


So then, considering that the Black body is likened to the cow in this analogy, questions arise of

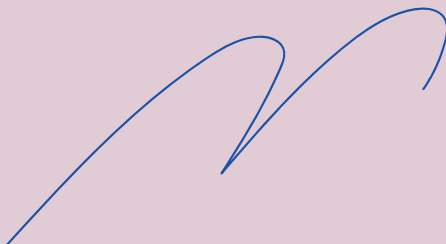


*First, how would the cows fare under a dictatorship of the proletariat? Would cows experience freedom at the mere knowledge that they're no longer being slaughtered in an economy of exchange predicated on exploitation? In other words, would it feel more like freedom to be slaughtered by a workers' collective where there was no exploitation, where the working day was not a minute longer than the time it took to reproduce workers' needs and pleasures, as opposed to being slaughtered in the exploitative context of that dreary old nine to five? Secondly, in the river of common sense does the flotsam of good sense have a message in a bottle that reads 'Workers of the World Become Vegetarians!'? Finally, is it enough to just stop eating meat? In other words, can the Gramscian worker simply give the cows their freedom, grant them emancipation, and have it be meaningful to the cows? (233-234)*

These are some of the analysis and questions posed in Wilderson's piece Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society? His writing frequently occupies my mind not only because of its carefully put together metaphors and the meticulous study of anthropologic history but as I continue to work my way into intellectual/ academic circles I frequently interact with Marxists. These thinkers, like my childhood friend, chalk Marxism up to be the ex-Machina for all of society's issues. All in all, it may be a viable altern to society's issues, but the question remains: How about the cows?



# BTR



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thoughts at [btr.zine@gmail.com](mailto:btr.zine@gmail.com)

