

Cornel West and Marxist Humanism

Critical Sociology

1–25

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DOI: 10.1177/0896920520988314

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Abstract

Humanity has experienced an explosion of anti-humanism in the form of authoritarian capitalism, postmodern filter bubbles, and global problems. Marxist/Socialist Humanism is the proper answer to the deep crisis of humanity. In this context, this article asks ‘How can Cornel West’s works inform a contemporary Marxist humanist theory of society?’ Taking West’s works as a starting point, what are the key elements of a Marxist humanist theory of society?

Cornel West is one of the leading critical intellectuals today. His work has fused anti-racist theory, Black Liberation Theology, Marxist theory, pragmatism, and existentialism.

This article especially focuses on West’s understanding of humanism and culture. It shows how his works and praxis can inform the reinvigoration of Marxist Humanism in the age of authoritarian capitalism as a socialist response. West’s thought can and should also inform the analysis of alienation, exploitation, domination, culture, the public sphere, the critique of ideology, and popular culture.

Keywords

Cornel West, Marxist Humanism, Black Liberation Theology, racism, culture, communication, Christianity, racial capitalism

Introduction: Foundations of Marxist Humanism

This article asks and tries to answer the following questions: How can Cornel West’s works inform a contemporary Marxist humanist theory of society? Taking West’s works as a starting point, what are the key elements of a Marxist humanist theory of society?

The approach this article takes is theoretical in nature. It develops theory and contributes to sociological theory and critical theories of society. It does not involve empirical, data-focused research. It engages with key works of Cornel West, sets them into the context of Marxist Humanism, and takes West’s writings as a starting point for an update of Marxist humanist theory. The discussion of West’s theory and the update of Marxist Humanism inspired by West focus on key aspects of Marxist humanist theory – namely alienation, organic intellectuality, praxis, culture, and the critique of ideology.

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Two key concepts that underlie the present article are humanism and Marxist Humanism. We therefore have to first ask: What is humanism? What is Marxist Humanism?

Humanism is a particular philosophical tradition and worldview that focuses on the human being as central moment of society; “humanism” established itself in the late nineteenth century as an umbrella term for any disposition of thought stressing the centrality of “Man” or the human’ (Soper, 1991: 187). Humanism ‘places human beings, as opposed to God, at the center of the universe. [. . .] [It is based on the] conviction that human destiny is entirely in human hands’ (Kraye, 2005: 477).

At its broadest, “humanism” means little more than a system of thought in which human values, interests, and dignity are considered particularly important. [. . .] Humanism’s focus is on the “big questions”, for example of what ultimately is real; of what ultimately makes life worth living; of what is morally right or wrong, and why; and of how best to order our society. (Law, 2011: 1, 6)

Synthesising these understandings, we can define humanism as a philosophical tradition and worldview that considers the human being as the central aspect of society; takes the human being as starting point for theory, ethics and politics; asks and deals with big questions about the human being’s role in society such as what the good life of humans in society is and how it can be achieved.

Luik (1998) identifies four philosophical forms of modern humanism: Marxist Humanism, pragmatist humanism, existentialist humanism, and Heideggerian humanism. Marxist Humanism is a form of humanism. It is a particular type and approach of critical social theory that is informed by Karl Marx’s works. Its representatives include, for example, Raya Dunayevskaya, Paulo Freire, Erich Fromm, CLR James, Henri Lefebvre, Georg Lukács, Herbert Marcuse, MN Roy, EP Thompson, and Raymond Williams (see the contributions in Fromm, 1965 and Alderson and Spencer, 2017 for an introduction). Key features of Marxist humanist theory are a strong influence by Hegel’s dialectical philosophy and Marx’s philosophical writings such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*; the stress of the importance of practices, praxis, and class struggles in class societies; the use and further development of Marx’s notion of alienation; and the development of a theory and philosophy of praxis where theorists act as organic intellectuals who inform struggles for democratic socialism and socialist democracy (Fuchs, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

Soper (1991: 188) provides the following characterisation of Marxist Humanism:

Marxist and socialist humanists have wanted to respect the “dialectic” between human agency and the circumstances in which it is exercised, but there has been a certain polarization in their argument: the existentialist approach has placed an emphasis on consciousness which is difficult to reconcile with the idea of ‘unwilled’ social forces whilst the Hegelian-Lukácsian school has emphasized the loss of humanity inflicted by generalized processes of reification and alienation, though perhaps at the cost of making them appear inescapable. In contrast to both these positions, structuralist and ‘post-structuralist’ anti-humanists either insist on the subordination of individuals to economic structures, codes and regulating forces (modes of production, kinship systems, the Unconscious, etc.) or attempt to ‘deconstruct’ the very idea of a “human meaning” prior to the discourse and cultural systems whose qualities it is supposed to explain.

Anti-humanists can, on the one hand, be found in the structuralist-Marxist theory tradition. Its representatives include, for example, Edward Bernstein, Karl Kautsky, Henryk Grossmann, Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Nicos Poulantzas, Ralph Miliband, Galvano della Volpe, Lucio Colletti, Alain Badiou, and Jacques Rancière. On the other hand, postmodern and post-structuralist thought is anti-humanist. Examples are the approaches of Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Félix Guattari, Julia Kristeva, Ernesto Laclau, Jean-François Lyotard, Chantal Mouffe, and Bernard Stiegler. The common

feature of anti-humanism is the structuralist assumption that not human beings and their practices are central in society, but structures that act on and constrain humans who are mere bearers and executors of structures.

Returning to the abovementioned definition of humanism, we can define Marxist Humanism as a philosophical tradition and worldview inspired by Marx that considers the human being as the central aspect of society; takes the human being as a starting point for the theoretical and practical analysis and critique of alienation, capitalism and class society; puts an emphasis on human practices and class struggles; and sees democratic socialism as the good society that enables a good life for all humans. For example, Marx (1852: 103) gave a humanist analysis of class struggle when he said that humans ‘make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past’. The point here is that structures condition class struggles but that significant social change in class societies can only be achieved when the exploited unite and collectively organise and struggle.

Humanity has experienced an explosion of anti-humanism (Fuchs, 2020a, 2020b, 2021) in three forms:

- (a) In many countries, there has been the rise of authoritarian governments, leaders, parties, and movements that threaten democracy and appeal to citizens who feel disenfranchised by capitalism by nationalism, racism, and demagoguery.
- (b) Postmodern culture has put so much stress on and fetishized difference that we have experienced the rise of filter bubbles that disable humans to see, put a stress on and talk about commonalities.
- (c) Global problems such as global inequalities, the global environmental crisis, the coronavirus crisis, and violent global conflicts threaten the survival of humanity.

Taken together, these factors have contributed to a crisis of the human being and society. The imminent danger is that violence and global problems escalate and that humanity is destroyed. The renewal of humanism is a proper political answer to this danger. Marxist Humanism stresses that democratic socialism is the proper alternative to the social formation that created global problems that threaten the survival of humanity.

West is one of the leading critical intellectuals today. He is an organic intellectual who has been highly visible in the public sphere through public interventions such as the support of the Bernie Sanders campaign, Black Lives Matter, and the Occupy movement. His work has been influenced by, has fused and has contributed to the development of anti-racist theory, Black Liberation Theology, Marxist theory, pragmatism, and existentialism.

West (1999: 19) describes his basic theoretical and political motivation in the following way: ‘I have tried to be a man of letters in love with ideas in order to be a wiser and more loving person, hoping to leave the world just a little better than I found it’. Stuart Hall (1996/2019: 83) characterises West’s work as ‘brilliantly concise and insightful’. At a 2009 public event in New York, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas was so impressed by West’s communication and argumentation skills, that he said that given West’s ‘prophetic speech’ and ‘moving rhetoric’, ‘the only possible response would be to stand up and to change one’s life’ (Butler et al., 2011: 114). Philosopher George Yancy (2001: 1–2) characterises West as a ‘radical democrat, humanist, race-transcending prophet, spiritual gadfly, social and cultural critical, advocate on the side of “the least of these”, political activist (combining elements of *theoria* and *praxis*), astute critic of our postmodern moment’. bell hooks (hooks and West, 1991/2017: 23–24) writes that West is one of the ‘few intellectuals in the United States able

to speak in an informed way about so many subjects, whose influence reaches far beyond the academy’.

This range of comments is an indication of the extraordinary power of West’s thought and praxis. Anyone interested in the question of how we can save humanity from its destruction today shouldn’t ignore and should engage with the works of West. This article asks the question of how West’s theory can inform the renewal of Marxist Humanism. The next section provides an analysis of West’s Marxist-Christian humanism, and the subsequent section analyses his concept of culture. The last section presents conclusions.

Marxist-Christian Humanism: Black Liberation Theology and Marxist Humanism

In his book *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, West (1982/2002) outlines foundations of a combination of Black Liberation Theology and Marxist theory. He advances a Marxist-Christian version of humanism. There are three distinctive features of West’s Marxist-Christian humanism:

- (a) the focus on alienation;
- (b) the critique of exploitation and domination; and
- (c) organic critical intellectuals.

Alienation

2 Humanism is, for West, a commonality of Black Liberation Theology and the version of Marxist theory he subscribes to. It is expressed in the insight that ‘every individual regardless of class, country, caste, race, or sex should have the opportunity to fulfill his or her potentials’ (West, 1982/2002: 16). This insight is based on Hegel’s philosophical dialectic of essence and existence, to which West explicitly refers (West, 1982/2002: 16, 150, footnote 5). Progressive Marxism and Christian liberation theology are both committed to the negation of domination and exploitation and the advancement of democracy and individuality (West, 1982/2002: 101). They are critiques of capitalist civilisation (West, 1982/2002: 101).

Hegel (1956) argues that Spirit is ‘alien to itself’ and that the truth of history is that essence and existence of Spirit can be reconciled (319), which means the realisation of freedom (17). While Hegel was confident that history automatically results in the ‘progress of the consciousness of Freedom’ (1956: 19), Marx substituted Hegel’s principle of Spirit in history by the principle of class struggle: In class societies, the exploited are alienated from the good life and the realisation of the full potentials of all humans and society. Class struggle is the way of realising these potentials. It makes history open and uncertain. West (1991) interprets Marx as a radical historicist. He argues that for Marx, ‘the real ground or basis of history’ are ‘the dynamic social practices and the constellation of institutions erected thereon by human beings’ (West, 1991: 90). In *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels (1848: 482) expressed the dynamic and practical character of human history by saying: ‘The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles’. In Christianity, egalitarianism is derived from the assumption that humanity was created by God, which endows all humans ‘with a certain dignity and respect which warrants a particular treatment, including a chance to fulfill their capacities and potentialities’ (West, 1988: 130).

West (1991: 47–48) stresses that Marx sees common life and sociality as key features of human beings and that alienation is a form of dehumanisation:

Marx seems to appeal to human nature and social freedom as ideals which contrast sharply with alienation and de-humanization. But it is important to note that he understands human nature as the true common life of social persons created and produced by those persons. Alienation is an impediment for this true common life of people, a humanization of this social intercourse and interaction of people. In this sense, Marx conceives human nature *as* social freedom and alienation *as* dehumanization, with the former morally desirable and the latter morally undesirable. Social freedom consists of the mutual ownership of products by producers; alienation consists of the private ownership of products by nonproducers.

West advances a Hegelian–Marxist concept of alienation as disempowerment and de-humanisation. He argues that forms of domination such as capitalism, racism, and patriarchy disempower and dehumanise individuals, which means that they do not allow them to realise their capacities and full potentials. He therefore also stresses the critique of exploitation and domination.

The Critique of Exploitation and Domination

McGary (2001) argues that humanists see human experiences and human needs as a basis for morality, believe in the positive capacities of human reason, and are concerned with the good life and social justice. He points out that West is a humanist because he ‘questions any form of human oppression’ (McGary, 2001: 289), stresses the need for humans’ ‘common struggle for human dignity’ (283), and that ‘democratic control over the major institutions that regulate’ society is the major step needed towards conditions where ‘every human is valued and respected’ (291).

West (1982/2002: 123) argues that there are four major forms of oppression today: ‘imperialist oppression, class exploitation, racial oppression, and sexual oppression’. This means that he focuses on the critique of (global) capitalism, racism, and patriarchy and their interactions. West doesn’t assume that all of these factors are equally influencing the living conditions of humans in contemporary societies. He argues that ‘class position contributes more than racial status to the basic form of powerlessness in America’ (West, 1982/2002: 115). He understands class in a Marxian sense as ‘the population’s relation to the mode of production [. . .] in terms of their role or lack thereof in decision-making processes for effective control over investment choices’ (West, 1988: 52). He writes that overstating

region, sex, age, ethnicity, and race’ and ignoring class results in a ‘petit bourgeois viewpoint that clamors for a bigger piece of the ever-growing American pie, rarely asking fundamental questions such as why it never gets recut more equally or how it gets baked in the first place. (West, 1982/2002: 116)

For sophisticated Marxists, this does not mean that class explains every major event in the past or present, or that economic struggles supersede all others. It simply suggests that in capitalist societies, the dynamic processes of capital accumulation and the commodification of labor condition social and cultural practices in an inescapable manner. (West, 1991: xxiii)

That West is a humanist means he stresses the commonalities of black and white workers. The interaction of racism and capitalism causes ‘powerlessness among black people’, which includes unemployment, low wages, bad housing, health care and educational conditions, and so on (West, 1982/2002: 114). Afro-Americans face exacerbated powerlessness (West, 1982/2002: 115), and many American workers have ‘no substantive control over their lives, little participation in the decision-making process of the major institutions that regulate their lives’ (114–115).

West argues that racism and sexism are ‘integral to the class exploitative capitalist system of production as well as its repressive imperialist tentacles abroad’ and that individuals face ‘the crucial existential issue of death, disease, despair, dread, and disappointment [. . .] within the context

of these present circumstances' (West, 1982/2002: 106; see also hooks and West, 1991/2017: 33). There is a substantial influence of existentialist philosophy, such as Kierkegaard's approach, on West's thinking. Racism buttresses 'the current mode of production, concealing the unequal distribution of wealth, and portraying the lethargy of the political system' (West, 1982/2002: 114). For West (1999: xvi), humanism means the insight that 'to be human, at the most profound level, is to encounter honestly the inescapable circumstances that constrain us, yet muster the courage to struggle compassionately, for our own unique individualities and for more democratic and free societies'.

Based on Ernest Mandel's work, West (1988: 74) distinguishes three phases of capitalist development:

- (a) industrial capitalism;
- (b) monopoly capitalism; and
- (c) multinational corporate capitalism.

He discusses the role of racism in each of the three stages, which means that he sees racism as an integral feature of capitalism:

- (a) Industrial capitalism was based on slavery and the military conquest of indigenous peoples and places of the world where people of colour live (West, 1988: 104).
- (b) Monopoly capitalism in the USA and other countries installed racist laws that discriminated based on skin colour and secured high levels of exploitation of people of colour (West, 1988: 104–105).
- (c) In multinational corporate capitalism, equality was formally established. On the one hand, there is an 'expanding middle class of people of colour'; on the other hand 'the underclass of black and brown working and poor people at the margins of society has grown', people of colour face educational inequality, and are especially affected by neoliberal cuts to public services and the establishment of a low wage service sector (West, 1988: 106).

West (1982/2002: chapter 3) defines humanism as one of four responses to US racial capitalism. The other responses are the propagation of Afro-American exceptionalism, assimilation into white American capitalism, and individualistic rebellions against marginalisation. West characterises these responses as petty-bourgeois. The Afro-American humanist tradition that West subscribes to and propagates 'affirms Afro-American membership in the human race, not above or below it' (West, 1982/2002: 71).

West provides important heuristic principles of how critical theories of society can think of the relationship of exploitation and domination. But he has not outlined a systematic theorisation of this relationship. Building on West's insight, we can further develop his approach. What follows next is the present author's own theorisation of the relation of class and domination that has been inspired by reading West's works, and taking these works as a starting point. It is in this context important to theorise the relationship of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy.

Society is a realm of social production. Human beings are producing and social beings who produce in social relations and (re)produce their sociality. Production is an economic principle that shapes all realms of society and all social relations. Lukács (1984, 1986) characterises production as *teleological positing*: Humans produce teleologically, which means they produce in order to achieve certain goals that satisfy their needs, wants and desires (see Fuchs, 2016, 2020 [chapter 2] for a more detailed discussion of teleological positing). Production is, however, not the same in

Table 1. Alienation as injustice.

Sphere	General features	Structure	Process	Antagonism	Injustice
Economy	Production of use-values	Class relation between capital and labour	Capital accumulation	Capital vs labour	Capitalist exploitation: capital's private ownership of the means of production, capital, and created products implies the working class' non-ownership and exploitation
Politics	Production of collective decisions	Nation-state	Accumulation of decision-power and influence	Bureaucracy vs citizens	Domination: citizens' lack of influence on political decisions as consequence of the asymmetric distribution of decision-power and influence
Culture	Production of meanings	Ideologies	Accumulation of reputation, attention and respect	Ideologues and celebrities vs everyday people	Invisibility, disrespect: lack of recognition as consequence of an asymmetric attention economy and ideological scapegoating

every realm of society. Human practices have distinct, relatively autonomous qualities and results in the different realms and systems that make up society as totality.

Capitalist society is a society that is shaped by the logic of accumulation and instrumental reason. In the economy, accumulation means the accumulation of capital. In the political system, accumulation means the accumulation of decision-power. In the cultural system, accumulation means the accumulation of reputation and attention. Accumulation results in alienation that creates structures that cause injustices. Injustice means that humans are denied a good life, the realisation of their potentials, and control of the conditions that shape their lives. Accumulation and alienation are forms of inhumanity. Table 1 provides an overview of the three forms of injustice as alienation.

Instrumental reason is a logic that instrumentalizes humans in order to realise the partial interests of the ruling class and dominant groups. Through exploitation, domination, and ideology, instrumental reason turns humans into instruments that advance partial interests of classes and groups that dominate society. In capitalist society, instrumental reason takes on the form of accumulation and results in inequalities. Instrumental reason undermines human equality. Exploitation, domination, and ideology deny humans their humanity. They are forms of alienation. Alienation means anti-humanism.

Capitalism, racism, and patriarchy are three modes of power relations that each combine economic alienation, political alienation, and cultural alienation. Capitalism, racism, and patriarchy involve specific forms of exploitation, domination, and disrespect (see Table 2).

The three forms of alienation are interacting in particular forms of power relations. Capitalism, racism, and patriarchy/gender-related oppression are inherently connected and interacting. The economy plays a particular role in this interaction because these power relations are relations of production and accumulation of power. Table 3 provides an overview of the interactions of capitalism, racism and patriarchy.

The capitalist economy creates forms of highly exploited, insecure, precarious labour – including racialised labour, unpaid labour, reproductive labour, and gender-defined labour – in order to maximise profits. Racism and patriarchy have economic, political, and ideological dimensions. In

Table 2. The economic, political and cultural-ideological dimensions of capitalism, racism and patriarchy.

	Capitalism	Racism	Patriarchy
Economic dimension	The exploitation of the working class	The exploitation and super-exploitation of racialised groups	The exploitation and super-exploitation of gender-defined groups, including houseworkers, female care workers and female wage-workers
Political dimension	Bureaucratic discrimination of, surveillance of, state control of, and violence directed against dominated classes (such as wage-workers, slave-workers, particular types of workers, etc.)	Bureaucratic discrimination of, surveillance of, state control of, and violence directed against racialised groups	Bureaucratic discrimination of, surveillance of, state control of, and violence directed against gender-defined groups
Cultural-ideological dimension	Denial of voice, respect, recognition, attention and visibility of the working class, ideological scapegoating of the working class	Racist ideology: assumption that race exists as cultural and/or biological essence; denial of voice, respect, recognition, attention and visibility of racialised groups, ideological scapegoating of racialised groups	Denial of voice, respect, recognition, attention and visibility of gender-defined groups, ideological scapegoating of gender-defined groups

Table 3. The interaction of class, racism and gender-based oppression.

	Class	Racism	Gender-related oppression, patriarchy
Class	Exploitation	Racist exploitation	Gender-structured exploitation
Racism	Racist exploitation	Racism	Discrimination of racialised individuals or groups of a particular gender
Gender-related oppression, patriarchy	Gender-structured exploitation	Discrimination of racialised individuals or groups of a particular gender	Gender-based discrimination

capitalism, these dimensions are united by the logic of accumulation. Class, racism, and gender-based oppression/patriarchy are the three main forms of power relations that advance alienation, deny humans their humanity and create damaged lives. Adolph Reed Jr. (2002: 272) argues that 'racial and class hierarchies' have 'their common foundation in the capitalist labor relation'. We can extend this insight by saying that in capitalist society, class relations, racism, and gender relations have their common foundation in the capitalist labour relation, which means that wage labour, racialised labour, reproductive labour, and unpaid labour constitute the common foundation of class, racism, and patriarchy.

Organic Critical Intellectuals

Italian Marxist philosopher Gramsci (2000: 304) argues that all humans ‘are intellectuals, one could therefore say; but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals’. For Gramsci, all humans have the capacity to contribute to the public analysis and debate of society. But in class societies, there is a division of labour between mental and manual labour and an asymmetric cultural power that results in the exclusionary character of educational institutions. The rise of the ‘knowledge society’ has made access to higher education more open so that academic education has become a feature of a larger number and share of workers. But education continues to be asymmetrically distributed. Gramsci (1971: 1–43; 2000: 300–322) argues that progressive political change requires organic intellectuals, who as an ‘organic’ part of the working-class movement provide inputs to the working-class’ ideas. Organic intellectuals are the ‘organic category of every social group’ (Gramsci, 1996: 202). Gramsci distinguishes organic intellectuals from traditional intellectuals who operate intellectually without connection to social groups and ‘remain comfortably nested in the academy’ (West, 1989: 234). Also the bourgeoisie has organic intellectuals. That’s why socialist politics is interested in a particular type of organic intellectuals, namely those that represent, defend, analyse, argue for and inform working-class interests – that is, the interest in the establishment of a socialist society.

West has been strongly influenced by Gramsci’s works. He argues that it is important that intellectuals act as organic intellectuals that are ‘leaders and thinkers directly tied into a particular cultural group primarily by means of institutional affiliations. Organic intellectuals combine theory and action, and relate popular culture and religion to structural social change’ (West, 1982/2002: 121). West (1989: 234) thinks that the humanism immanent in the combination of Christian Liberation Theology, Marxism, and pragmatism compels the intellectual to be ‘entrenched in and affiliated with organizations, associations, and, possibly, movements of grass-roots folk’.

Johnson (2001) argues that West is a humanistic scholar because he acts as the organic intellectual who puts ‘the life of the mind to praxis’ (330) by public political engagement and activist in organisations such as the Congressional Black Caucus and the Democratic Socialists of America. West’s Marxism is a humanist Marxism; his theology is a radical, humanist, socialist theology. He characterises this approach as Black Theology of Liberation and Critique of Capitalist Civilisation (West, 1982/2002: 106). ‘Human struggle sits at the center’ of West’s approach (West, 1989: 229). He considers it important ‘to keep alive the sense of alternative ways of life and of struggles based on the best of the past’ (West, 1989: 229). His focus on praxis is oriented on social struggles for a good society that fosters the common good for all humans. Through such struggles, practice becomes a ‘material force’ (West, 1989: 232).

Politically, West’s socialism is close to council communism, an approach developed by organic intellectuals such as Rosa Luxemburg, Anton Pannekoek, and Karl Korsch that supports prefigurative politics and favours ‘the self-organization and self-guidance of the working class movement’ (West, 1982/2002: 136). West’s adherence to councilist ideas also explains why he stresses the importance of self-management in the economy and politics and argues for participatory democracy.

The Afro-American humanist tradition that West stands for argues for participatory democracy as condition for overcoming racism – that is, ‘the democratic control over institutions in the productive and political processes’ (West, 1982/2002: 89). It stresses the powerlessness of Afro-Americans in politics and the capitalist economy (90) and the need for institutional transformations. According to West (1982/2002), creating a participatory democracy requires that ‘the black and white poor and working classes unite against corporate domination of the economy and government’ (90). Participatory democracy enables all humans to fulfil their ‘potentialities and capacities’

and advances self-management (West, 1982/2002: 91). 'Human liberation occurs only when people participate substantively in the decision-making processes in the major institutions that regulate their lives' (West, 1982/2002: 112). This includes that companies should be self-managed by their workers (West, 1982/2002: 114). West (1988: 52) argues that, for Marxism, empowerment and the democratic control of institutions are the indicators for quality of life, whereas for Weberians it is high incomes.

West has a particular style of public speaking. He characterises it as a 'passionate rhetoric' that is 'involved, engaged, passionate', has been influenced by Afro-American styles of preaching, and that is a reflection of his philosophical, moral and political engagement with the world and the concern for a better society that overflows with passion (West, 1999: 21). West (1989: 233) calls his approach prophetic because it 'harks back to the Jewish and Christian tradition of prophets who brought urgent and compassionate critique to bear on the evils of their day'. For West (1993b: 3–6), prophetic thought is the combination of discernment, connection, tracking hypocrisy, and hope. It is a broad and deep analysis of power (discernment); considers the humanity of others as key principle (human connection); courageously challenges the gaps between rhetoric and reality (tracking hypocrisy); and wants to make a difference to galvanise, energise, inspire and invigorate world-weary individuals and groups (hope).

West is a very active speaker who gives many talks, interviews and participates in a variety of events. He sees books as an important public intervention into intellectual life, culture, politics and society. West's books such as *Race Matters* have been widely read and discussed. West is convinced that books as media of public intervention are not enough, which is why he has tried to utilise popular culture as political means of communication. He recorded three rap albums (*Sketches of my Culture*, 2001; *Street Knowledge*, 2005; *Cornel West & BMWB: Never Forget: A Journey of Revelations*, 2008), which shows the importance he gives to popular culture in political activism and communication. West also has a highly visible presence on social media. In September 2020, his Twitter profile @CornelWest almost had a million followers; his Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/drcornelwest/> had more than 800,000 followers. Together with sociologist Tricia Rose, West hosts the podcast *The Tight Rope*. Until September 2020, Rose and West had moderated 19 episodes that had reached around 100,000 downloads on the podcast hosting service Podbean (<https://spkerboxmedia.podbean.com/>).

One criticism of West is that he is much too focused on socialist preaching than on being part of actual social struggles. Spence (2015: 104, 129) writes in this context:

Cornel West wouldn't spend so much of his time speaking to black audiences if he didn't believe speaking to them had an effect on their politics. But in relying primarily on rhetoric that emphasizes a certain type of political leadership he misses other important aspects of political action. [. . .] while we should in general be wary of using religious metaphors in talking and writing about political struggle, we should be particularly wary about the use of prophetic language because it places more value on powerful speech (often articulated by charismatic male figures) than on labor, and hence, privileges individuals over communities, and privileges an aristocracy (based on speech) over democracy.

West's popularity, influence, and skills as a speaker do not make him a charismatic leader, but rather an organic intellectual who supports radical movements in several respects. Let us take Black Lives Matter (BLM) and The Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) as examples. As organic intellectual, West has supported these movements in several respects. First, he points out the importance of the movement in his interviews, talks and popular writing, which helps the movement in countering prejudices. Via West, BLM and M4BL reach a mainstream audience that hears positive views and assessments of the movement. For example, in an interview in *The Guardian*,

West said that Black Lives Matter is a ‘beautiful new moment in the struggle for black freedom’ (Muir, 2020). After the murder of George Floyd, West told CNN that Black Lives Matter is a ‘movement for love and justice’¹ and moved moderator Anderson Cooper to tears. Second, West has helped to not only raise awareness of the movement but also organise financial support. For example, in August 2020, West participated in the Fundraiser for Black Lives that brought in US\$10,000.² Third, West has supported the organisation of protests. For example, when M4BL organised protests under the name ‘Six Nineteen: Defend Black Lives’ on Juneteenth 2020 (<https://sixnineteen.com/>), West appeared in a video in which he called for participation (see <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=250818662887419>).

West in various ways also supported, for example, Bernie Sanders, the Occupy movement, the Democratic Socialists of America, or the Campaign for Peace and Democracy. He initiated the Stop Mass Incarceration Network (<http://www.stoppoliceterror.org>) and participated in the counter-demonstration to the Unite the Right Rally that took place in Charlottesville in August 2017. West is not simply an idealist socialist preacher but in a very materialist way an organic intellectual – in Gramsci’s sense of the term – who is grounded in and supportive of left-wing movements. West has the skill to move humans not just to tears, but also onto the streets.

Reed (2000) criticises that West and other black public intellectuals speak to white audiences about black lives. He would thereby act as a ‘Moral Voice for white elites’ (Reed, 2000: 86) and as ‘star [. . .] in the white left’ (73);

white forums, particularly those associated with the left, have become the primary arenas for elaboration of black commentary and critical public discourse, an all-purpose message, equally suitable for corporate boards, rarefied academic conferences, White House dinners, and common folk. And, unsurprisingly, the white audience overwhelms and sets the terms for the black, repeating an ironic pattern begun with Washington. (Reed, 2000: 83, 84)

Reed’s essay that formulated this criticism first appeared in *Village Voice*, a New York-based alternative weekly whose audience its promotion manager described as ‘young, hip, and affluent’.³ Reed spoke to the same ‘white elites’ that West and others according to him spoke to. If a critical public intellectual were to speak to only one audience, then they would contribute to the fragmentation of the public sphere and the creation of small, powerless micro-publics. West speaks in different context to different audiences – blacks, whites, multiracial, working class, middle class, and so forth – because he is a socialist universalist who believes in the need for forging alliances in social struggles against capital, racism, fascism, and patriarchy. Like West, Reed acts as socialist public intellectual who appears on popular YouTube channels such as Jacobin, The Michael Brooks Show, or Rolling Stone-magazine’s Useful Idiots, where he passionately and effectively makes arguments for socialism and Marxist analysis.

At the bottom line, Reed’s and West’s politics have important commonalities, which has for example become evident in their support of Bernie Sanders. Let us compare what both said about Sanders:

[Sanders]located a discourse frame and message that resonated broadly among the working-class population. (I define “working class” in line with Michael Zweig’s simple criterion – those who take rather than give orders at work – which includes many who are routinely characterized as middle class by virtue, for example, of home ownership or white-collar employment.). Sanders showed in dramatic fashion what some on the Left have insisted for a long time, that very many Americans of all races, genders, and sexual orientations feel that their concerns, worries, and aspirations are ignored by both political parties and that they will respond affirmatively to voices that do attempt to connect with them. (Reed, 2018: xiii)

In September 2015, West (2015) introduced Sanders at a Democratic primary rally in South Carolina:

We are here in fact to highlight our dear brother Bernie Sanders. [. . .] he represents so much of the best and the latest in Martin Luther King Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Herschel and Dorothy Day and Miriam McCloud Bethune and so many others who said what? We are concerned with unarmed truth and the condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak. And if you are concerned about truth in politics you have to push out the big money. If you're concerned about truth in politics you're going to have to keep track of the poor children. You have to keep track of the elderly and the orphans and the widows and the working people whose wages have stagnated. And you have got to keep track of the one percent who now own forty-two percent of the wealth. And in the richest nation of the world, twenty-two percent of children, forty percent of black children, brown children, red children still live in poverty. [. . .] Are you concerned about the decrepit schools? Are you discerned about the dilapidated housing? Are you concerned about the massive unemployment and underemployment that are not reflected in the statistics because they don't count those folks who are not looking for work or part time workers? [. . .] Bernie Sanders is calling for a political revolution predicated on a moral and spiritual awakening. [. . .] Come together across colour, across class, across sexual orientation, across region. That's what Bernie Sanders' campaign is all about.

Both Reed and West stress that Sanders appeals to the working class that they both see as consisting of a broad range of workers who are dispossessed and disempowered by the capitalist class. Both argue that that a broad working-class alliance across colour, working class faction, sexual orientation, gender, and so on is needed. And they see the Sanders' campaign as the platform that can make such united struggles possible. Both Reed⁴ and West stress that humans have to come together and organise around their common interests in the struggle for socialism. They both put an emphasis on the importance of class struggle. Reed (2000: xiii–xiv) argues that structuralist Marxism forgets that ‘the course of history is dynamic and open-ended, that *people* actually do make history, even if not “as they please, under circumstances chosen by themselves”’. Like Reed, West (1991: 59, 87) in his interpretation of Marx stresses the role of praxis – that is, class struggle:

What separates Marx's own brand of emancipation from the others is that his communism rests upon the kind of human productive activity which promotes social freedom, that is, satisfies evolving human needs and permits the ex pression of human properties and faculties. [. . .] Marx's materialist conception of history is supported by his radical historicist viewpoint in that both focus on the dynamic social practices of people.

For Marx (1844: 182), praxis is a social struggle that aims at overthrowing ‘*all relations* in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being’. Praxis wants to establish an ‘absolute humanism’ (Gramsci, 1971: 330) – socialism. West has contributed as an organic intellectual with a variety of praxis forms to the struggle for socialism.

West is an organic intellectual who is part of and informs progressive social movements that struggle for democratic socialism and participatory democracy and makes use of popular culture for passionate political interventions. Culture is naturally important for organic critical intellectuals such as West. Already Marxist humanists such as Gramsci and Lukács had a particular interest in culture and the relationship of culture and political economy. The engagement with culture is an important feature of many Marxist humanist approaches. We will therefore next look at West's analysis of culture.

Cornel West on Communication and Culture

There are four dimensions of West's engagement with culture:

- a) the concept of culture;
- b) humanist culture and the public sphere;
- c) the critique of ideology; and
- d) popular culture.

The Concept of Culture

West (1988: 100) gives the following definition of culture:

Cultural practices are the medium through which selves are produced. We are who and what we are owing primarily to cultural practices. The complex process of people shaping and being shaped by cultural practices involves the use of language, psychological factors, sexual identities, and aesthetic conceptions that cannot be adequately grasped by a social theory primarily focused on modes of production at the macrostructural level.

For West (1993/2017: 12), culture is 'rooted in institutions such as families, schools, churches, synagogues, mosques, and communication industries (television, radio, video, music)'. Today, we have to add the information, communication and collaboration capacities of the Internet and social media to the institutions that enable and shape human meaning-making. For West (1993/2017: 12), cultural institutions have their economies and politics just like culture operates in the economy and politics because they 'promote particular cultural ideals'.

West defines culture as practices focus on the formation of identity, the self, and how humans make meaning of themselves, each other and society. The humanist character of his understanding is evident from West's focus on cultural practices.

West says about language and communication:

Language cannot be a model for social systems, since it is inseparable from other forms of power relations, other forms of social practices. I recognize, as Gadamer does, the radical linguisticity of human existence; I recognize, as Derrida does, the ways which forms of textualization mediate all our claims about the world but the linguistic model itself must be questioned. The multilevel operations of power within social practices – of which language one is one – are more important. (Stephanson and West, 1989: 270–271)

In his definitions of culture just cited, West limits the communication industries and the use of language to culture.

West tends to relegate language and communication to the realm of culture. But humans also use language in the workplace and in political groups and organisations. Language and communication are fundamental aspects of human existence that play a role in all realms of society and all social systems. West also sees production as limited to the economic realm. But he says himself that there is the cultural production of selves, which shows that production processes extend beyond the economy into all realms of society. The economy as the realm of production operates in all realms of society, including political and cultural relations, groups, organisations, and institutions. There is a dialectic of communication and production (Fuchs, 2020a): Humans produce communicatively; communication is the production of understanding and human sociality. Communication is a form of production. Production is also communication. The communication industry and communication workers such as journalists, academics, and artists show that communication is economic just like it is cultural.

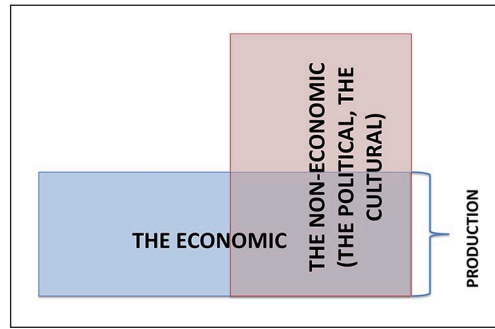


Figure 1. The relationship of the economic and the non-economic.

An often-discussed and controversial issue in Marxist theory is the base/superstructure-problem. It deals with the question of how the economic and the non-economic (politics, culture) are related. West is critical of structuralists such as Althusser who argue that the economic mode of production turns humans into bearers of structures whose actions are economically programmed. West (1982/2002: 49) stresses that there is

not a history without a subject propagated by the structuralist Louis Althusser, but rather a history made by the praxis of human subjects which often results in complex structures of discourses which have relative autonomy from (or is not fully accountable in terms of) the intentions, aims, needs, interests, and objectives of human subjects.

There is ‘no direct correspondence between nondiscursive structures, such as a system of production (or, in Marxist terms, an economic base), and discursive structures, such as theoretical formations (or, in Marxist terms, an ideological superstructure)’ (West, 1982/2002: 49). It is important to add that there is a common element between all realms of society and between all types of practices, namely social production. Production is part of all human activities. It is the unifying and common element of society. Williams stresses that culture is material (see Fuchs, 2017, for a detailed discussion). He speaks of ‘the material character of the production of a cultural order’ (Williams, 1977: 93). Ideas do not stand outside of material activity, but are produced socially in society. For Williams, there is no immateriality.

West (1999: 257) follows Williams’ neo-Marxist conception of the relation between the economic and the non-economic, in which there is ‘the mutual setting of limits and exerting of pressures’ (see Williams’ essay ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’, Williams, 2005: 31–49).⁵ There is the ‘multi-leveled interplay between historically situated subjects who act and materially grounded structures that circumscribe, i.e., enable and constrain, such action’ (West, 1999: 257). For West, there is a ‘privilege’ of ‘the economic sphere without viewing the other spheres as mere expressions of the economic’ (West, 1999: 258). This means that West sees the economic as key sphere of society, but he stresses that the non-economic cannot be reduced to the economic although it is grounded in it. West does not advance a proper vocabulary for conceptualising this complex, dialectical relationship of the economic and the non-economic. But we can, inspired by and based on West, update the Marxist-humanist understanding of the economic and the non-economic. So what follows next is the present author’s own understanding that takes West’s theoretical works as one of its starting points.

In his 'Base and Superstructure' essay, Williams solved the base/superstructure problem in the form of an interactive dualism that sees the economic and the non-economic as interacting but leaves them separate. Starting with his book *Marxism and Literature*, Williams (1977) advanced a fully developed cultural materialism, where the economic and the non-economic are identical and separate. Cultural materialism has an 'emphasis on production' (Williams, 1981: 12), which includes economic production, political production, and cultural production as material processes in society (see Fuchs, 2017). Based on cultural materialism, Figure 1 visualises the relationship of the economic and the non-economic. Economic production operates in all economic and non-economic relations in society but does not determine the content and form of the non-economic. The non-economic has emergent qualities that are non-reduceable to the economy, sublate the economic and interact with the economic. The economic and the non-economic are identical, non-identical, intersecting, and interacting.

Humanist Culture and the Public Sphere

The public sphere is a realm of society that stands in-between, mediates and interfaces the economy, politics, and culture. In the public sphere, humans communicate about matters that are of public relevance – that is, concern the many. '[C]ritical public debate' (Habermas, 1991: 52) is a key feature of the public sphere. The public sphere has a political–economic dimension in the form of organisations of the public sphere that have certain forms of ownership, resources, funding, and so forth, and a cultural dimension of meaning-making.

West argues for a humanist culture of the public sphere, where humans encounter each other as humans, brothers and sisters, and friends in dialogue, also when they disagree. He stresses the importance of dialogue as principle of the public sphere. 'West is a deep believer in dialogue as a means of breaking down the walls that separate people' (Cone, 2001: 111). For West (1999: xvii–xviii), dialogue is a 'free encounter of the mind, soul and body that relates to others in order to be unsettled, unnerved and unhoused', I is 'the I-Thou relation with the uncontrolled other'. He argues that dialogue has the potential to 'broaden the scope of empathy and imagination' (Butler et al., 2011: 95).

West's notion of the public sphere is comparable to the one of Habermas (1991), who has complemented his notion of the public sphere by discourse ethics, a practice where humans achieve agreement via rational discourse.

[In] rational discourse, where the speaker seeks to convince his audience through the force of the better argument, we presuppose a dialogical situation that satisfies ideal conditions in a number of respects, including, as we have seen, freedom of access, equal rights to participate, truthfulness on the part of participants, absence of coercion in taking positions, and so forth. (Habermas, 1994: 56)

West shows how racism undermines the democratic character of the public sphere. People of colour have frequently been banned from or marginalised from politics and therefore also from the public sphere and political communication in the public sphere. Culture is about meaning-making, recognition, voice, visibility, and attention. In class and heteronomous societies, cultural power is asymmetrically visible. In racist societies, racialised groups are not just highly exploited, killed at will, and denied political participation; their voices, minds, and bodies are also excluded from culture. They are culturally disrespected, ignored, kept voiceless, and made invisible. West (1999: 10) argues in this context:

every major institution in American society – churches, universities, courts, academies of science, governments, economies, newspapers, magazines, television, film and others – attempted to exclude black people from the human family in the name of white-supremacist ideology. This unrelenting assault on black humanity produced the fundamental condition of black culture – that of *black invisibility and namelessness*.

Black invisibility and namelessness constitute a form of cultural disrespect and malrecognition. Disrespect is also political when it extends to invisibility in the public sphere and exclusion from political decision-making. It is also economic to the degree that people of colour are excluded from the control of organisations and institutions such as the mass media that play a role in public meaning-making. West (1999: 115) argues based on Du Bois' (1903/2007) *The Souls of Black Folk* that racism has in the USA also meant 'the relative lack of communication across the Veil of color'. Du Bois (1903/2007: 136) speaks of the 'Veil of Color' that forces blacks in America to live a double-life, 'as a Negro and as an American'. Du Bois refers to the Veil also as 'color-line' (e.g. 1903/2007: 32, 68, 113, 124, 125) and Veil of Race (1903/2007: 55, 57, 184). Racism deeply divides the economy, politics, culture, everyday life, private life, public life – society – along the lines of racialisation. It is an economic, political and cultural system of social classification that creates a society of two classes, where one is conceived of and treated as being fully human and the other one as subhuman, inhuman, not fully human. Racism that denies black people humanity and individuality creates a veil that 'separates the black and white worlds. [. . .] This Veil not just precludes honest communication between blacks and whites; it also forces blacks to live in two worlds in order to survive' (West, 1999: 104). 'The unique combination of American terrorism – Jim Crow and lynching – as well as American barbarism – slave trade and slave labor – bears witness to the distinctive American assault on black humanity' (West, 1993/2017: vii).

The US public sphere has marginalised black voices. The 'public sphere is racialized' (West, 1999: 487). In racial capitalism, the public sphere is 'regulated by and for well-to-do, white males in the name of freedom and democracy' (West, 1993a: 27). Corporate market institutions have greatly contributed to the 'shattering of black civil society' and 'the weakening of black cultural institutions' (West, 1993/2017: 16). When racialised groups are denied voice, names, visibility, and attention in the public sphere, what Habermas terms the re-feudalisation of the public sphere takes on the form of disrespect and malrecognition as dehumanising racist culture.

Some observers have criticised West, and especially his book *Race Matters*, for focusing too much on the politics of cultural recognition instead of political economic redistribution (e.g. Joseph, 2001; Steinberg, 1994). Such claims overlook that West argues for the combination and a dialectic of the politics of redistribution and recognition.

If the elimination of black poverty is a necessary condition of substantive black progress, then the affirmation of black humanity, especially among black people themselves, is a sufficient condition of such progress. [. . .] Any progressive discussion about the future of racial equality must speak to black poverty and black identity. (West, 1993/2017: 65, 67)

Together with Tavis Smiley, West wrote a book about poverty that ends with a manifesto that makes socialist demands for the eradication of poverty that resemble many of Bernie Sanders' demands (Smiley and West, 2012).

Like Habermas (1991), West is critical of the reduction of the public sphere to entertainment, consumerism, and market culture (West, 1999: 115). Habermas (1991) speaks in this context of the re-feudalisation of the public sphere. As a consequence, 'public discourse has degenerated into petty name-calling and finger-pointing – with little room for mutual respect and empathetic

exchange' (West, 1999: 115). Big Money's rule of culture has resulted in 'market-driven celebrities who thrive to glitzy spectacles and seductive brands' (West, 1993/2017: xvi). Status became an obsession and capitalist consumer culture advanced an individualism that has harmed communal relations and solidarity (West, 1993/2017: 36–37). For West (1993/2017: 6), also contemporary politics is dominated by 'images, not ideas', which contributes to the destruction of the public sphere. According to West (1993/2017: 14), the consequence of neoliberalism and the destruction of the public sphere is nihilism in society – meaninglessness, hopelessness, lovelessness.

West envisions a public sphere where everyone can be heard as a human being independent of their colour, class, gender, and other classifications. This requires a new framework and new languages (West, 1993/2017: 6) that focus on empathy and compassion (8), the extension of public infrastructure and public services (6), large-scale public intervention to ensure access to basic social goods (7), an invigoration of 'common life' and 'the common good' (7), a love ethic (18–19), grassroots democratic organisations (19), race-transcending prophetic leaders (39–40, 46), race-transcending intellectuals (42–43), and cultural hybridity (101). For West, strengthening the public sphere has a political economy dimension – the elimination of poverty and socio-economic injustices–; a political dimension – political participation –; and a cultural side – cultural frameworks that make human voices visible and allow humans to come together and form communities that cut across dividing lines. West (1989) is critical of John Dewey's reduction of the public sphere to a cultural democracy – what Dewey calls 'the great community' where democracy is purely achieved by 'pedagogical and dialogical means', which means Dewey 'falls back on 'communication' (106). West stresses the importance of economic and political self-management of organisations that operate in the public sphere.

The Critique of Ideology

For Marx, 'to be dialectical is to unmask, unearth, to bring to light' (West, 1982/2002: 110). The critique of ideology is an important aspect of Marx's works. Marx especially analysed the ideological concepts of society advanced by bourgeois economists. In addition, he analysed how politicians, newspapers, philosophers, religion, science and the commodity form (the fetishism of the commodity) advance ideology.

Based on Marx, West (1982/2002: 119) understands ideology as 'the set of formal ideas and beliefs promoted by the ruling class for the purpose of preserving its privileged position in society'. West (1982/2002: 119), based on Gramsci, stresses that ideology needs a hegemonic culture that

subtly and effectively encourages people to identify themselves with the habits, sensibilities, and world views supportive of the status quo and the class interests that dominate it. It is a culture successful in persuading people to 'consent' to their oppression and exploitation.

Counter-hegemony means the practice of oppositional world views, sensibilities, and habits that challenge hegemonic culture (West, 1982/2002: 120, 121). 'Human struggle is always a possibility in any society and culture' (West, 1982/2002: 120). Culture and religion therefore have the capacity 'to be instruments of freedom or domination, vehicles of liberation or pacification' (West, 1982/2002: 120).

For West, racism has a political-economic role that interacts with ideology. A political economy aspect of racism is that slaves were used as gratis labour forces and that many black workers in contemporary capitalism are highly exploited: 'racism provided the chief ideological justification for the use of Africans as slaves in the Americas; and sexism was employed to defend the abuse of women both on the plantations in the Americas and within the mills in Britain' (West, 1982/2002:

124). West (1982/2002) argues that the rise of racism had besides a political–economic dimension also a cultural–ideological dimension. Racism ‘is as much a product of the interaction of cultural ways of life as it is of modern capitalism’ (West, 1988: 100). Racism in the form of white supremacy is a form of anti-humanism that emerged in the period between the late 17th century and the late 19th century based on theories such as natural history’s definition of races as well as phrenology and physiognomy in anthropology that defined racial differences and the superiority of whites over blacks (West, 1982/2002, chapter 2). West (1982/2002: 65) stresses that the emergence of racism not just had to do with the ‘exploitative (oligopolistic) capitalist system of production but also’ with ‘cultural attitudes and sensibilities, including alienating ideals of beauty’.

Popular Culture

Referring to Gramsci and Williams, West (1982/2002: 118–121) argues that class struggle not just takes place in the work situation but also ‘takes the form of cultural and religious conflict over which attitudes, values, and beliefs will dominate the thought and behaviour of people’ (119). He is interested in popular culture because he sees it as a potential realm of and a cultural dimension of class struggle.

West (1982/2002: 6; 2001: 348) stresses that Black Liberation Theology takes seriously the role of culture and the reality of social, civic, physical, psychic and spiritual death of Black people in contemporary societies. He is interested in progressive Christianity because it allows ‘suffering to speak’ (Butler et al., 2011: 99). West (1988: 19) argues that the major contribution that religion can make to left strategy is to show that the ‘culture of the oppressed’ matters for the formation of community and political action.

For Afro-Americans, Methodist and Baptist churches and music (black gospel, blues, jazz, rhythm and blues [R&B], soul, funk, rap) have been important aspects of everyday life under racist conditions and of coming together and forming communities. For slaves in the USA, composing and singing spirituals was an expression of their sorrows, joys, and hopes. Spirituals influenced the development of blues, jazz, gospel music, and R&B. ‘Among large numbers of black youth, it is black music which serves as the central influence for the shaping of their psyches’ (West, 1988: 69). Black music appeals to ‘alienated young people’ (West, 1988: 177). It is ‘a countercultural practice with deep roots in modes of religious transcendence and political opposition’ (West, 1988: 177). West (hooks and West, 1991/2017: 37) is interested in popular culture, especially music, because it is one of the areas ‘where Black humanity is most powerfully expressed, where Black people have been able to articulate their sense of the world in a profound manner’.

West (1982/2002: 86) argues that Afro-American music expresses ‘what it is like to be human under black skin in America’ and is Afro-American humanism. Afro-American folklore, spirituals, gospels, blues, and jazz convey a ‘profound message of personal and communal struggles – of persistent negation and transformation of prevailing realities’ (West, 1982/2002: 88). Songs, singing, and concerts ‘serve as media of social communication which express the values for the joint communal existence of Afro-Americans’ (West, 1982/2002: 88). Black culture is an expression of ‘the ontological wounds, psychic scars and existential bruises of black people’ (West, 1999: 102). For groups that have faced existential threats and experiences such as genocide, war, racist violence, exploitation, and so on, popular culture is an important form of working through and expressing their experiences in artistic forms, an expression of rage about injustices (West, 1999: 108–109), and also of keep on keepin’ on (103). Popular culture is in this context the hope that things will be different. Popular cultural expressions of Afro-Americans’ cries and moan go

back to the indescribable cries of Africans on the slave ships during the cruel transatlantic voyages to America and the indecipherable moans of enslaved Afro-Americans on Wednesday nights or Sunday

morning near godforsaken creeks or on wooden benches at prayer meetings in makeshift churches. (West, 1999: 102)

West sees books and talks as possibilities for critical interventions into the public spheres. But he says that this is not enough because in capitalism, not everyone has the time and capacities to engage with books. He therefore stresses that music, television, film, and video are important means for critical public communication (hooks and West, 1991/2017: 45). Today, we also have to add the Internet, social media, and podcasts. West stresses that Black voices are marginalised in the capitalist media, 'the Black infrastructure for intellectual discourse and dialogue is nearly non-existent' (hooks and West, 1991/2017: 134). Inspired by the council communist idea of self-management, West therefore argues for the creation of self-managed cultural and media organisations so that 'Black intellectuals [. . .] establish and sustain their own institutional mechanism of criticism and self-criticism, organized in such a way that people of whatever color would be able to contribute to it' (hooks and West, 1991/2017: 134). 'We must have Black cultural workers within television, film, and video who are presenting alternative perspectives [. . .] We also need more Black journalists who are writing in widely accessible newspapers and magazines' (hooks and West, 1991/2017: 45).

West (1988: 186) argues that rap's speed and 'linguistic versatility' resembles the style of preaching and 'recovers and revises elements of black rhetorical styles'. Music and preaching are for West (Stephanson and West, 1989: 280) *the* black means of cultural expression. He considers the two as inseparable (Stephanson and West, 1989: 281). Influenced by the political spoken-word performances and soul and jazz poetry of Gil Scott-Heron, rap is partly directly political (political rap) and is a 'cry of desperation and celebration of the black underclass and poor working class, a cry which openly acknowledges and confronts the wave of personal cold-heartedness, criminal cruelty, and existential hopelessness in the black ghettos of Afro-America' (West, 1988: 186).

Rap gives particular stress to communication and language. A rap song contains a vast amount of poetry and words, spoken very quickly. Rap is a form of public political communication. Political rap and conscious rap are political at the level of content level; many forms of rap are political at the level of social form where they are complex reflections and expressions of life in racist capitalism. Rap, like all music, appeals not just to our reason, but also to our emotions, affects, and bodies. Dancing, singing, listening, performing music, and concerts are social acts where humans come together. Hip hop culture's appeal to white youth can create 'a shared cultural space where some humane interaction' between black and white humans takes place (West, 1993/2017: 84). West sees popular culture and music as an important form of community building that he likes to see as one possible means of socialist culture, praxis and consciousness-raising. Popular culture alone isn't politics, but it is an important way of how humans come together and can form bonds that can bind together communities and allows them to form and express their collective identity. Socialism therefore should appropriate popular culture as one of the means for attaining socialist ends.

Adolph Reed Jr. (2000) is critical of West's cultural politics. 'West loads up on Continental theory to explain why the music he listened to in his undergraduate dorm is the apotheosis of black culture and why poor people need moral rearmament' (Reed, 2000: 87). Reed (2000: 88–89) speaks of cultural politics as a

quietistic alternative to real political analysis. It boils down to nothing more than an insistence that authentic, meaningful political engagement for black Americans is expressed not in relation to the institutions of public authority – the state – or the workplace – but in the clandestine significance assigned to apparently apolitical rituals. Black people, according to this logic, don't mobilize through overt

collective action. They do it surreptitiously when they look like they're just dancing, or as a colleague of mine ironically described it, "dressing for resistance".

West and others who take culture serious do not suggest that popular culture can or should replace trade unions, political parties, or street protests. West is active in political groups just like he attends street protests and appears in movies, podcasts, and hip hop songs. In the age of communicative and digital capitalism, leaving the realm of popular culture aside as one of the spaces of struggle means to render socialist politics less effective because popular culture and the Internet are important meeting places for large groups of people. If entertainment replaces politics, as Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) feared, then popular culture indeed acts as ideology. But West and others politicise popular culture. They want to create a left-wing cultural politics that contributes to political mobilisation. Every social movement has a particular culture that it practices in the form of songs, images, chants, jokes, symbols, dances, aesthetics, and so on. A rebellion not just needs political ideas, demands, strategies and tactics, but also music, dancing, means of internal and public communication and so forth.

West isn't affirmative of popular culture. He argues that the capitalist profit-motive has introduced a dumbing down of music 'for pecuniary gain', 'eliminated most soulful group performers for big-name celebrities-to-be, and unleashed vicious stereotypes of women, men, LGBTQ people, and others' (West, 1993/2017: xxii). In a way, West here to a certain degree reflects Horkheimer's and Adorno's (2002) concept of the culture industry. West is critical of anti-Semitism, sexism, the glorification of capitalism and so forth in black culture. He blames the capitalist focus on 'spectacle, image, money, status' for such tendencies that he characterises as 'neoliberal spiritual warfare' and 'a market-driven attack on the very souls of Black folk' (West, 1993/2017: xxii). He also characterises the commodification and brutalisation of culture as '[p]ostmodern culture' (West, 1993/2017: 5).

West's analysis of popular culture differs from the one we find in mainstream Cultural Studies. For West, counter-hegemony is no automatism, but a possibility. He stresses that popular culture has a potential to be a means of creating community and helping progressive political groups to form, come together, and express their identity and demands, but it isn't always progressive. Popular culture is a necessary but not a sufficient dimension of socialist movements. Such movements also require political organisation, programmes, resources and so on.

In American Cultural Studies, John Fiske has advanced deterministic concepts of counter-hegemony and popular culture. He sees popular culture as necessarily political and resistant: 'Popular culture [. . .] always bears traces of the constant struggle between domination and subordination, between power and various forms of resistance to it or evasions of it, between military strategy guerrilla tactics' (Fiske, 1989: 19). For Fiske (1989: 168), the consumption of popular culture means 'always relationships of domination and subordination, always ones of top-down power and of bottom-up power resisting or evading it'. 'Discursive struggles are an *inevitable* part of life in societies whose power and resources are inequitably distributed' (Fiske, 1996: 5).

In British Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall (1981/2019: 348) presented popular culture as a constant battlefield where resistance is inevitable: 'In the study of popular culture, we should always start here: with the double-stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it'.

There are points of resistance; there are also moments of supersession. This is the dialectic of cultural struggle. In our times, it goes on continuously, in the complex lines of resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation, which make the field of culture a sort of constant battlefield. (Hall, 1981/2019: 354)

Hall's use of the terms 'inevitability', 'continuity', and 'constancy' here implies a determinism of resistance, political resistance as necessary elements of popular culture. These formulations exclude the alternative of resistance and counter-hegemonies as possibilities that are forestalled.

West shares with Hall the insight that popular culture 'is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why "popular culture" matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don't give a damn about it' (Hall, 1981/2019: 361). But West rejects a deterministic concept of class struggle, counter-hegemony and resistance as necessary and inevitable. For West, popular culture is a potential means of social and class struggles for socialism. He sees socialist counter-hegemony and class struggles as conditioned potentials shaped by society's dialectic of chance and necessity. West's humanism is different from the Althusserian structuralism that has influenced thinkers such as Hall, in whose works we can hardly find human beings that act, but rather structures that act (Fuchs, 2019: 4–6; 2017: 759–760).

Conclusion

This article dealt with the following two questions: How can Cornel West's works inform a contemporary Marxist humanist theory of society? Taking West's works as a starting point, what are the key elements of a Marxist humanist theory of society?

West is a role model of a critical public intellectual who has contributed to the fusion of socialist theory and praxis. His works and praxis can inform the reinvigoration of Marxist Humanism in the age of authoritarian capitalism as a socialist response. His works can and should inform the analysis of alienation, exploitation, domination, culture, the public sphere, the critique of ideology, and popular culture.

West is a representative of a Marxist-Christian humanism that combines Black Liberation Theology and Marxist Humanism. His Marxist-Christian humanism has three core features: (a) the focus on alienation; (b) the critique of exploitation and domination; and (c) organic critical intellectuals.

With respect to *alienation*, West advances a Hegelian-Marxist concept of alienation as disempowerment and de-humanisation. He argues that forms of domination such as capitalism, racism and patriarchy disempower and dehumanise individuals, which means that they do not allow them to realise their capacities and full potentials.

With respect to the *critique of exploitation and domination*, West is both critical of economic reductionism that purely focuses on class and identity politics-reductionism that focuses on mal-recognition and disregards class and capitalism. He focuses on the critique of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy and their interactions. West gives particular attention to the economy by stressing that class underpins all forms of oppression, including racism and patriarchy. He argues that capitalism, racism, and patriarchy and their interactions deny humans their humanity.

West provides important heuristic principles of how critical theories of society can think of the relationship between exploitation and domination. But he has not outlined a systematic theorisation of this relationship. Building on West's insight, we can further develop his approach. In this article, such an attempt was presented that identified economic, political and cultural-ideological dimensions of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy and analysed how capitalism, racism, and patriarchy interact.

With respect to *organic critical intellectuality*, West understands himself as an organic intellectual in Gramsci's sense of the term. Influenced by council communism, West argues for self-managed organisations and participatory democracy as the realisation of a humanist society. West is a passionate speaker who understands how to move his listeners emotionally and politically. He uses books, public talks, interviews in the popular press, rap music, social media, and podcasts as

political means of communication in the public sphere. West is an organic critical intellectual who is part of and informs progressive social movements that struggle for democratic socialism and participatory democracy. He makes use of popular culture for passionate political interventions.

There are four dimensions of West's engagement with culture:

- a) the concept of culture;
- b) humanist culture and the public sphere;
- c) the critique of ideology; and
- d) popular culture.

West argues for a *concept of culture* that solves the base/superstructure-model in a dialectical manner so that the non-economic spheres of society such as culture are based on but cannot be reduced to the economy. Cultural materialism has established a more concrete theoretical language and models for the dialectic of the economic and the non-economic.

West argues for a *humanist culture of the public sphere*, where humans encounter each other as humans, brothers and sisters, and friends in dialogue, also when they disagree. West's notion of the public sphere is comparable to the one of Habermas. He shows how racism undermines the democratic character of the public sphere. When racialised groups are denied voice, names, visibility, and attention in the public sphere, what Habermas terms the re-feudalisation of the public sphere takes on the form of disrespect and malrecognition as dehumanising racist culture.

Marx and Gramsci influenced West's concept of *ideology*. West stresses the interaction of ideology and hegemony and that there is always the *possibility* for counter-hegemonic struggles. For West, racist ideology is the cultural dimension of racism that interacts with the latter's political economy.

West is interested in *popular culture* such as black music as a potential means of and cultural dimension of class struggle. Popular culture, including religion and music, has been an important aspect of black people's experience of and reaction to racism in the United States. West is himself popular culture. His passionate way of talking in the public sphere is influenced by the culture of blues, jazz, and rap. West is critical theory's and academia's Gil Scott-Heron. West doesn't see all popular culture as progressive and resistant. He argues that the profit motive of capitalist consumer culture dumbs down, depoliticises, and alienates popular culture. West rejects deterministic understandings of class struggle, counter-hegemony and resistance as necessary and inevitable. For West, popular culture is a potential means of social and class struggles for socialism.

Donald Trump is the prototype of the contemporary authoritarian personality. But there is not just one Trump. There are one, two, many Donald Trumps. Trump is just a symbol and manifestation of authoritarian capitalism. Renewing socialist humanism is an urgent political task as counter-hegemonic antidote to the Donald Trumps of this world and their systems. West (2017) argues that Trump is 'a product of American civilization, the vicious legacies of white supremacy still operating' (27) and means 'neo-liberal economy on steroids' and the betrayal of the working class (28). Given the age of de-humanisation we live in, socialist humanism is the truly viable alternative to and necessary form of struggle against authoritarian capitalism.

We live in a world where multiple crises intersect: the economic crisis-proneness of capitalism, a crisis of social inequalities, the COVID-19 pandemic-health crisis, the climate crisis, the crisis of democracy posed by new nationalism and right-wing authoritarianism, and so on. The world's divisionists stress human beings' differences and that they should be separated along the lines of friends and enemies. To overcome the world's multiple, intersecting crises, we need international solidarity and class struggles that overcome division and unite the working class by what it has in common and what it can struggle for in common. The 21st century poses the political alternative between socialism and barbarism in new forms. It is uncertain how society will look like in 10, 20,

30, and 50 years from now. Democratic socialism is the humanist alternative to the divisionist pathways of war, fascism, and destruction. Cornel West's humanism reminds us that class and social struggles in the moment we are now in have to focus on the struggle for the realisation of everyone's human dignity, which means the struggle for democratic socialism in the light of the dawning of barbarism. West shows that humanism means both the dedication to democratic socialism and the insight that only human praxis – that is, struggle – can realise democratic socialism as the full development of humanity.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/us/2020/06/10/cornel-west-george-floyd-cooper-ac360-vpx.cnn>, accessed on 22 November 2020.
2. <http://bostonreview.net/race/boston-review-where-do-we-go-here-fundraiser>, accessed on 22 November 2020.
3. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/marketing/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/village-voice-llc>
4. Reed (2020: 39) argues that identity politics' attacks on what its representatives call 'class reductionism' results in a form of neoliberalism so that 'identity politics is not an alternative to class politics; it is a class politics' that constitutes the left-wing of neoliberalism. He argues that the alternative is the focus on anti-capitalist politics. Reed advances the Marxist-humanist agenda of focusing on the common by arguing that labour is the common feature of the oppressed and exploited.
5. West (1989: 172) characterises Williams as a socialist intellectual who highlights, 'in relatively cold moments in human societies', that 'class conflict is mediated through social, cultural or educational changes that insure the muting of class struggle'.

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