



Frederick Douglass



Harriet Tubman



Karl Marx



John Brown



Sojourner Truth



Frantz Fanon

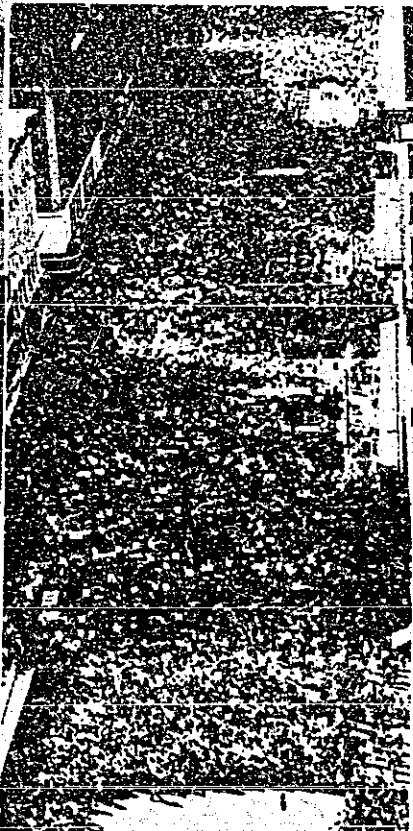
American Civilization On Trial

BLACK MASSES AS VANGUARD

Expanded edition includes:

A 1980s View of the Two-Way Road Between the U.S. and Africa — by Raya Dunayevskaya

Appendix: Black Caucuses in the Unions — by Charles Denby



Statement of the National Editorial Board of News & Letters

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Front cover photos, clockwise from right:

Detroit Civil Rights March, June, 1963.
Soweto youth challenge South African apartheid, 1976.
Black youth defy police water hoses, Alabama, 1963.
Confrontation with police, Miami Rebellion, 1981.

Back cover photos, clockwise from top:

South African peasant women protest oppressive pass laws, 1957.
Black Mississippi women organize in 1964.
Namibian cannery workers express defiance.
Chrysler workers' sit-in wins victory in 1973.
Namibian freedom fighters in the Kalahari, ca. 1905.

American Civilization On Trial

BLACK MASSES AS VANGUARD

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A 1980s View of the Two-Way Road Between the U.S. and Africa

On this double 20th anniversary of the famous 1963 March on Washington and the first publication of *American Civilization on Trial*, the struggle continues. The planned August 27, 1983 March on Washington is taking place when the deep economic recession spells out Depression for the Black world, not only in terms of unemployment — especially that of the youth which is an incredible 50 percent — but in the whole field of civil rights, where that supreme artificer, President Reagan, is trying to roll back what civil rights struggles had achieved over the past two decades.

Reagan's retrogressionism makes it more imperative than ever not to leave these stark facts at the factual stage alone. Otherwise, all we could report is that the Magnolia Jungle we described in our first edition is as searing as it was when Bull Connor unleashed the fire-hoses, vicious dogs and cattle prods against teenagers in Birmingham, Alabama and four young Black children were blown to bits in a church there — after which Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman were tortured and murdered in Mississippi, and Viola Liuzzo was gunned down and Rev. Reeb clubbed to death following the Selma to Montgomery March. Indeed, that jungle is still at such white heat that Black youth in Florida have erupted in revolt for three years in a row.

The truth is, however, first, that what was won through the last two decades was inseparable from the intense new forms of revolt. The turbulent 1960s witnessed the birth of a whole Third World, central to which was the Black Revolution both in the U.S. and in Africa. Secondly, inseparable from and simultaneous with that, was the Marxist-Humanist banner that *American Civilization on Trial* raised in the context of the whole 200-year history of the U.S., whose civilization had been put on trial and found guilty.

In a word, to separate a philosophy of liberation from the struggle for freedom is to doom us to yet one more unfinished revolution such as has characterized the U.S. from its birth, when the Declaration of Independence was meant for white only and left the Black enslaved. It was because this history, not only as past but as present, remained racist on the 100th anniversary of the "Emanci-

pation Proclamation" that the Introduction to *American Civilization on Trial* was entitled: "Of Patriots, Scoundrels and Slave Masters."

Historic Turning Points: Slave Revolts, Women's Dimension, Anti-Imperialism

What *American Civilization on Trial* disclosed was that, at each historic turning point of development in the U.S., it was the Black masses in motion who proved to be the vanguard. Take the question of the slave revolts leading to the birth of Abolitionism, which had created a new dimension of American character. It is not only, as we pointed out, that "They were interracial and in a slave society preached and practiced Negro equality. They were distinguished as well for inspiring, aligning with and fighting for equality of women in an age when the women had neither the right to the ballot nor to property nor to divorce. They were internationalist, covering Europe with their message, and bringing back to this country the message of the Irish Freedom Fighters." It is that the vanguard nature of the Black dimension in the Abolitionist movement has much to say to us today — even when it comes to Women's Liberation.

Take so simple a matter as a name, specifically Sojourner Truth's name. Keep in mind what the question of choosing a name means in today's Women's Liberation Movement, which has discussed widely the question of not bearing one's husband's name. But did anyone other than Sojourner Truth include a whole philosophy of freedom in a chosen name? Listen to her story. She said she "talked with God," told him she refused to bear a slave name, and asked what should she do? "He" answered her as follows: Sojourn the world over and tell everyone the truth about American democracy, that it doesn't exist for Blacks. That was how she decided to call herself "Sojourner Truth."

Woman as Reason as well as Force has always been hidden from history, not to mention philosophy. Yet, as early as 1831, the very year Nat Turner led the greatest slave revolt, Maria Stewart spoke up in public — the first American-born woman, white or Black, to speak publicly. Her appeal was to:

"O ye daughters of Africa, awake! awake! arise! no longer sleep nor slumber but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties . . . How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles? . . . How long shall a mean set of men flatter us with their smiles, and enrich themselves with our hard earnings: their wives' fingers sparkling with rings and they themselves laughing at our folly?"

Total deafness to women shaping history extended into the 20th century, even when it wasn't a question of the rights of any single person, but when whole masses in motion fought — and won!

In Africa, in 1929, tens of thousands of Igbo women had self-organized against both British imperialism and their own African chiefs whom they accused of carrying out the new British edict to tax women. It took our age and a new Women's Liberation Movement to bring forth just such pages of history.¹

The vanguard nature of the Black dimension is seen also in the struggle against imperialism at its earliest appearance. Take the question of the Spanish-American War, Blacks sensed its imperialist nature and became the very first force in the world outside of Latin America itself to organize an Anti-Imperialist League in 1899. In a word, whether the focus is on the Civil War in the U.S. or the world anti-imperialist struggles, the Black masses in motion showed their multi-dimensionality.

In the very same year that the Anti-Imperialist League was formed, in a different part of the world the revolutionary Marxist, Rosa Luxemburg, wrote:

"At present, Persia and Afghanistan too have been attacked by Russia and England. From that,

1. See Judith Van Allen's "Aba Riots or Igbo Women's War" in *Ushahamu* 6: no. 1 (1975). An elaborated version also appeared in *Women in Africa*, Nancy Hafkin and Edna Day, eds. (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1978). See especially a global view of revolutionary women in Rosa Luxemburg, *Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*, pp. 79-112.

the European antagonisms in Africa too have received new impulses; there, too, the struggle is breaking out with new force (Fashoda, Delegoa, Madagascar). It's clear that the dismemberment of Asia and Africa is the final limit beyond which European politics no longer has room to unfold. There follows then another such squeeze as has just occurred in the Eastern question, and the European powers will have no choice other than throwing themselves on one another, until the period of the final crisis sets in within politics . . . etc., etc."

The birth of a whole new Third World in our age cast a new illumination both on Luxemburg's flash of genius on imperialism's rise and on the little-known page of Black history concerning its early anti-imperialist struggles. The struggles today have reached a new intensity, and they are multi-dimensional. As we witnessed in the anti-Vietnam War struggles, it was the Black youth who first articulated the defiance as "Hell, no! We won't go!". Yet it has become clear since the 1960s that even the greatest actions need the direction that comes from a total philosophy of freedom. What is needed now is to concretize such a philosophy of freedom as the reality for our age.

Emergence of the Third World as Marx Foresaw It

What *American Civilization on Trial* reveals is both Marx's deep American roots and his Promethean vision. Take the succinct way in which Marx pinpointed the situation in the Civil War at its darkest moment, as the war dragged on and the Southern generals were winning so decisively as to produce a defeatist attitude in the North. Where others looked at the military forces, Marx looked at the forces of revolution: "A single Negro regiment would have a remarkable effect on Southern nerves . . . a war of this kind must be conducted along revolutionary lines . . ." (Letter from Marx to Engels, August 7, 1862).

From his very first break with capitalism, as he discovered a whole new continent of thought and of revolu-



Black Union cavalrymen bring in Confederate prisoners during Civil War.

tion which he called "a new Humanism," capitalism is what Marx critiqued and fought against throughout his life. Here is how he described the origins of European capitalism:

"The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins, signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production." (*Capital*, Vol. I, p. 823, Kerr edition)

The unmasking of Western civilization's racism by its Black dimension in revolutionary moments of mass upsurge makes imperative a most serious return, on this centenary of Marx's death, to his critical, revolutionary unmasking of Western civilization's capitalist foundations. Just as in the U.S., so in Britain, Western civilization has been put on trial by the Black dimension. This became especially sharp with the April 1981 Brixton rebellion. Like the famous Kerner Commission Report following the 1967 rebellions in the U.S. and the current investigations into the Miami rebellions, the British government has produced its own Scarman Report on the Black British rebellions. While the tone of the British report is more outraged than its American counterpart at the stripping away of Britain's fetishism about its vaunted "civilization," Lord Scarman nevertheless found that "the disorders, like so many riots in British history, were a protest against society by people, deeply frustrated and deprived, who saw in a violent attack upon the forces of law and order their one opportunity of compelling public attention to their grievances." Being in the business of empire longer than the Americans, however, the British authorities are more expert in recognizing historic continuities in the new forms of revolt against their rule. Thus, in its very first paragraph, the Scarman Report observed that "the petrol bomb was now used for the first time on the streets of Britain (the idea, no doubt, copied from the disturbances in Northern Ireland)."²

Frantz Fanon was absolutely right when, in our age, he wrote: "Two centuries ago, a former European colony decided to catch up with Europe. It succeeded so well that the United States of America became a monster . . ." The extreme urgency of dealing with that global monster today demands that the struggles be tightly woven together with a total philosophy. As we work it out for our age, what is needed is a concentration, at one and the same time, on 1) the trail to the 1980s from Marx's last decade, and 2) revolutionary Black thought.

It was in his last decade that Marx discovered still newer paths to revolution. Present-day existing state-capitalisms calling themselves Communist, like Russia and China, have totally abandoned both the philosophy

and the actuality of Marx's "revolution in permanence." Marx, on the other hand, began introducing fundamental changes in his greatest theoretical work, *Capital*, which disclosed his new perceptions of the possibility of a revolution in technologically underdeveloped lands before the technologically advanced West. Take the simple word "so-called" placed by Marx in the title of the final part of *Capital*: "The So-Called Primitive Accumulation of Capital." Though that word has been disregarded by post-Marx Marxists, it touches the burning question of our day — the relationship of technologically advanced countries to the technologically underdeveloped Third World. What Marx was saying with that word, "so-called", was that it simply wasn't true that capitalism's carving up of the Asian and African world characterized only the primitive stage of capitalism.

To further stress that technologically advanced capitalism has not at all left behind the so-called primitive stage of turning Africa into "a warren for hunting black skins" and forcing them into slavery in "civilized" countries, Marx subordinated the whole section of Part 8 and made it integral to Part 7, "Accumulation of Capital." There it reached its highest point — the concentration and centralization of capital. Thereupon, Marx added a whole new paragraph to the 1875 French edition of *Capital*, which showed that this continued outreach into imperialism "successively annexed extensive areas of the New World, Asia and Australia."³

As Marx then turned to study pre-capitalist societies — be it of the Native Americans, the Indians in Morgan's *Ancient Society*, or the Australian aborigine designated by Marx as "the intelligent Black", he hit out against anyone trying to transform his chapter, "The Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation" into a "Universal." Marx insisted that he had been describing the particular, historic stage of Western capitalism; that other societies need not follow that path. If they did, they would "lose the finest chance ever offered by history to a people and undergo all the fatal vicissitudes of the capitalist regime."⁴

Revolutions in Philosophy and in Fact

Marx's projection of the possibility of a revolution coming first in technologically underdeveloped lands achieved a new meaning for our age with the emergence of a whole new Third World, as well as new mass struggles and the birth of new revolutionary forces as reason. The Black dimension in the U.S. as well as in Africa showed that we had, indeed, reached a totally new movement from practice to theory that was itself a new form of theory. It was this new movement from practice — those new voices from below — which we heard, recorded, and dialectically developed. Those voices demanded that a new movement from theory be rooted in that movement from practice and become developed to the point of philosophy — a philosophy of world revolution.

Our very first major theoretical work, *Marxism and*

2. Marx often singled out the deep relationship between Irish revolutionaries and all other minorities. A new projected 11-volume documentary study, covering the impact of Garveyism on the U.S., Africa and the West Indies, reveals the revolutionary relationship between Garveyism and the Irish struggles in the early part of the 20th century. Vol. I (1826-1918) and Vol. II (1919-1920) are due off the press in November, 1983, edited by Robert A. Hill (Berkeley, Cal.: Univ. of California Press). See also "British Civilization on Trial," in the May-June, 1981 issue of *Marxist-Humanism*, journal of British Marxist-Humanists, available from News & Letters.

3. This paragraph was left out of Engels' English and German editions. It is discussed in Chapter 10 of Rosa Luxemburg, *Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution*, "A Decade of Historic Transformation: from the Grundrisse to Capital."

4. Marx's letter to the journal which had published a critique of his work by the Russian Populist, Mikhailovsky, was written in November, 1877 but not published in Russia until 1886 after Marx's death in 1883.

Freedom, cast in the context of that movement from practice, was followed by a series of pamphlets in which the voices of all the revolutionary forces — workers, Blacks, women and youth — could be heard: from *Workers Battle Automation to Freedom Riders Speak for Themselves*, and from *The Free Speech Movement and the Negro Revolution to Working Women for Freedom*.⁵ Indeed, it was not only the voices of the Freedom Riders we heard in 1961, but the story of the magnificent Black women in Mississippi who called themselves "Woman Power Unlimited" and came to the aid of the jailed Freedom Riders.

American Civilization on Trial cast a new illumination on the two-way road between Africa and the U.S. via the West Indies by showing that what, to the capitalists, was the triangular trade of rum, molasses and slaves, was, to the Blacks, the ever-live triangular development of internationalism, masses in motion and ideas. This triangular development remains the dominant force to this day.

In our epoch, the dynamism of ideas in Africa comes out in sharp focus as we contrast it to the weary American bourgeois ideologues who declared the 1950s to be "the end of ideology" just when a whole new Third World emerged. As against what the capitalist ideologues wrote then, consider the 1959 speech by Leopold Sedar Senghor to the Constitutive Congress which united Mali and Senegal:

"A nation that refuses to keep its rendezvous with history, that does not believe itself to be the bearer of a unique message — that nation is finished, ready to be placed in a museum. The Negro African is not finished even before he gets started. Let him speak; above all, let him act. Let him bring like a leaven, his message to the world in order to help build a universal civilization . . . Let us recapitulate Marx's positive contributions. They are: the philosophy of humanism, economic theory, dialectical method."

It is true that Africa, too, has since undergone many retreats, as the Union of Mali and Senegal has broken up and Senghor has retrogressed in thought, as well. It is not true that the mass freedom struggles have abated. Nor is it true that Senghor represents all of African thought. Frantz Fanon was the opposite both in thought and in act, and it is his philosophy that is alive as far as South Africa is concerned and, indeed, can become a foundation for today's freedom struggles worldwide. It was this new stage in the two-way road that we presented in our 1978 pamphlet *Frantz Fanon, Soweto and American Black Thought*.

If we return to the year 1959, when Senghor made the Address to his Congress, we find that to be the same year that Frantz Fanon addressed the Second Congress of Black Artists and Writers meeting in Rome, where he said: "The consciousness of self is not the closing of a door to communication. Philosophic thought teaches us, on the contrary, that it is its guarantee. National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension."

5. The full development of Marxist-Humanist philosophy in the U.S., under the title "Marxist-Humanism, 1941 to Today, Its Origin and Development in the U.S." is on file and available on microfilm at the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI 48202.

Furthermore, this was not philosophy for its own sake or history as past, because Fanon was contrasting the Black worker to the Black intellectual in that battle against colonialism:

"History teaches us clearly that the battle against colonialism does not run straight away along the lines of nationalism . . . It so happens that the unpreparedness of the educated classes, the lack of practical links between them and the mass of the people, their laziness, and let it be said, their cowardice at the decisive moment of the struggle will give rise to tragic mishaps." (*Wretched of the Earth*, p. 121, Grove Press edition)

In this, too, Fanon's vision saw far. Which is why the final chapter of the 1973 work *Philosophy and Revolution* — "New Passions and New Forces: The Black Dimension, the Anti-Vietnam War Youth, Rank-and-File Labor, Women's Liberation" — quoted the American Black auto worker who gave the philosophy of Humanism its sharpest edge: "There is no middle road anymore. The days we accepted 'we have to take the lesser of two evils' are gone. You have to go to the extreme now. Racism is the issue here, and to rid ourselves of that, to be Humanist, we need a revolution."

The Black Consciousness Movement today recognizes Fanon as a great Third World theorist, at the same time that they recognize Steve Biko's unique creativity in the Soweto uprising in 1976 and in founding their great new movement. This is precisely why South Africa's barbaric apartheid system murdered Biko in September 1977.

It was no accident that Charles Denby, the Black production worker-editor of *News & Letters* since its birth, felt impelled in 1978 to add a new Part II to the story of his life which had been published in 1952 as *Indignant Heart*. Thus, Part II of *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal begins* with the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the very year News and Letters Committees were born and ends with a chapter on "The Worldwide Struggle for Freedom" which discusses "the American Black identification with Soweto and Biko, with Fanon and Caribbean thought." It becomes clear why this story of Denby's Life, North and South, which sums up a half century of freedom struggles, from the struggles of rural Blacks in the South to the wildcat strikes of Black workers in the North, concludes with this Black worker's declaration: "I consider my story as part of the worldwide struggles for freedom."

It is in Azania (South Africa) that the most exciting events are now unfolding, revealing how the mine workers there are both organizing and thinking their own thoughts. A simple word — "Amandla!" (Power) — tells how new a stage they have reached. It is this word which Teboho Noka, an organizer for the National Union of Mine Workers, used in order to stress that not only are they fighting for different conditions of labor and higher wages, but for "Amandla" — adding: "It shall be ours." It is that feeling of fighting for nothing less than freedom which transforms the struggle from a mere trade union battle to one for a whole new society.

Like Marx in his day, Frantz Fanon, in our age, declared his philosophy to be a "new humanism," as he developed it most originally in his *Wretched of the Earth*:

"Comrades, let us flee from this motionless movement where gradually dialectic is changing into the logic of

equilibrium. Let us consider the question of mankind." (p. 254)

"For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man." (p. 255)

"This new humanity cannot do otherwise than define a new humanism both for itself and for others." (p. 197)

Mass Unrest Today and the Need for Truly Human Foundations

Just as it was the Black dimension which sounded the alarm against U.S. imperialism's first adventure in the Philippines and the Caribbean at the turn of the century, so today it is the Latino dimension which is opposing Reagan's imperialist actions in Central America and the Caribbean. The gunboat diplomacy which saw the United States invade again and again — from Cuba and Nicaragua to Panama and Honduras in the period from the turn of the century into the 1930s — has returned in a vicious new form under Reagan. His policies of installing right-wing dictatorships and attacking the nascent Nicaraguan revolution seemed aimed at engulfing all of Central America in a "regional" war — that is, getting the Latin American countries to fight each other for the benefit of U.S. imperialism. The revolutionary opposition arising from within Central America — indeed, all of Latin America — extends to the Latino dimension right here within the U.S. At one and the same time, all are united in working to stay Reagan's counter-revolutionary hand, and by seeking out and expressing the dimensions of national minorities, sex and class are creating new pathways toward social revolution, in Latin America and in the U.S. itself.

The mass unrest today throughout the world, the deep recession we are in, and the many political crises we face compel intense new activities — whether on the production line or in the massive anti-nuke campaign or in the Black revolutionary movements — unseparated from a new passion for philosophy and revolutionary direction. That revolutionary direction can be seen as we sum up how Marx worked it out concretely for his philosophy of "revolution in permanence" in relation to the Black world.

Marx's reference in the *Ethnological Notebooks* to the

Australian aborigine as "the intelligent Black" brought to a conclusion the dialectic he had unchained when he first broke from bourgeois society in the 1840s and objected to the use of the word, "Negro," as if it were synonymous with the word, "slave." By the 1850s, in the *Grundrisse*, he extended that sensitivity to the whole pre-capitalist world. By the 1860s, the Black dimension became, at one and the same time, not only pivotal to the abolition of slavery and victory of the North in the Civil War, but also to the restructuring of Capital itself. In a word, the often-quoted sentence: "Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the Black skin it is branded," far from being rhetoric, was the actual reality and the perspective for overcoming that reality. Marx reached, at every historic turning point, for a concluding point; not as an end but as a new jumping-off point, a new beginning, a new vision.

In the specific case of the Civil War in the U.S., it was not only a question of theory or of national action, but one of international organization as Marx established the International Workingmen's Association to come to the aid both of the North, especially the Abolitionists, in that Civil War, and of the European working class struggles, especially the Polish revolt against Russian Tsarism. As Poland shows us all over again today, freedom fighters do not give up their struggle even when compelled to work under the whip of the counter-revolution.

There is no doubt that we are on the threshold of new revolutionary beginnings in the Black world in this Marx centenary year. The 20-year history of American Civilization on Trial and world development has seen not only capitalism's drive to war threaten the very existence of civilization as we have known it, but also its absolute opposite; revolutionary masses in motion. The Reagan retrogression — and the ceaseless struggles against the attempts to push back all the gains of the past two decades — gives urgency to this new fourth, expanded edition (and fifth printing) of *American Civilization on Trial*.

The absolute challenge to our age is the concretization of Marx's concept of "revolution in permanence." The Black dimension is crucial to the total uprooting of existing, exploitative, racist, sexist society and the creation of new, truly human foundations.

— Raya Dunayevskaya for the
National Editorial Board of
News & Letters
August, 1983

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