

PART II

Essays

Radical Africanism

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Whatever happened to radical Africanism?¹ A very short time ago at Montreal (October, 1969) a small band of black Hercules tore off the lid of the African Studies Association--opening a can of worms that most old, tired Africanists would have much preferred remain sealed until their respective retirement. The Association was filled with the "types" we can disregard in this piece, but the Association was also filled with lots of well-meaning white liberals² (and some black reformers too, of course). The black "supermen," who stormed Montreal in the form of a Black Caucus, pricked the consciences of these white men and women. Some liberals withdrew from the fight on the spot; others withdrew from the Association in varying degrees during the months that followed--when it appeared that the Johnson-Cole Resolution³ was getting at least lukewarm support. But others, the "well meaning" ones, supported, at least half-heartedly, many of the black demands. Back "home" in the centers and departments more black students were recruited into African studies programs; more got funding; problems facing Africa were looked into more penetratingly; and some centers, journals, etc. began to take stronger stands on political issues such as anti-colonial stances on South Africa and Portugal.

What a euphoric courtship it was! Out of Montreal's ashes came a greater flourishing of the Africa Research Group, the establishment of Michigan State's radical house-organ, MAZUNG-UMZO, Wisconsin's BA SHIRU, and UCLA's UFAHAMU--not to mention other lesser known post-1969 radical publications. Student organizations such as the African Activist Association came alive with new black students! Centers such as the one at UCLA could boast that almost half of the new students of a particular year were black! More black faculty and visiting scholars checkered the offices of some centers for a time. Ah, the delicate courtship of white and black radicals rang like the song of "orioles" . . . or Baraka (LeRoi Jones) might say that it was like "*Kenyatta Listening to Mozart*." Or, he might call it "*The Party of Insane Hope*."

What happened? The African Studies Association sent all of us a Valentine on a February day,⁴ and many people began to think the struggle was pretty tiring—maybe even self-defeating. Suddenly we find more activism across the Atlantic (e.g. *RADICAL AFRICANA*). Suddenly we find that there is more opposition to the white South African regime among some Afrikaner students than among U.S. Africanists (an ironic commentary, to say the least)—whose radicals pretend to form a “pressure group” to effect U.S. policy in such areas. Well, maybe that was too ambitious for a start. But what about all those “radical” students (black and white) who stormed into the centers, the ones who were going to change so many things—the whole “structure of things” in academia? Where are most of them after three years? Are they all sipping tea, listening to Mozart, and enjoying the groves of academe from their rose-tinted windows?

Have any of them asked what happened to the Africa Research Group—in some ways the most uncompromising of new radical organizations? Why is *MAZUMGUMZO* having to plead for funds to continue? What has happened to *BA SHIRU*!? Is *UFAHAMU* next? Will any of those “radicals” of the short post-Montreal era of change be able to leave their newly acquired important posts in big universities and turn their backs on the lucrative grants afforded to them? Like Baraka, “*We have awaited the coming of a natural/phenomenon. Mystics and romantics, knowledgeable/workers/of the land./ But none has come./ but none has come. . .*”

Notes

¹ Lest someone should ask right off how I am defining “radicalism,” let me remark briefly that I am referring to radicalism at many levels. At the level of political theory Basil Davidson expresses it well:

The basic problem for Africans is to find their own way of revolutionizing the structures of the past, and revolutionizing the colonial structures which they've had imposed upon them, and which they inherited, in large part, when they have become politically independent. Africans need this dual revolution along African Zines; they need it because they have to move on to new systems and modes of production . . . This challenge can be met only by building entirely new structures . . . within which the general mode of production in Africa can move in what one may loosely call “urbanism and industrialism” . . . That is the kind of revolution I am talking about. . . this kind of revolution will not be, cannot be, in the direction of capitalism. It must be in the direction of socialism. (Ufahamu, I, 3, 1971, P. 8).

Radicalism in methodology is more than a “fresh” approach to various subjects. It is a recognition of the non-existence of “value-free” social science. It is a commitment to a value system. It is an approach based upon the realization that most of our (i.e. western) empirical generalizations, heuristic devices, theoretical constructs are value-laden, basic-ally conservative, and based upon outmoded ideal types. Many of the conventional approaches have been unable to handle change, and, as an inadvertent (or, perhaps advertent) consequence, have militated against change. Radical Africanism militates against the complacent acceptance of these western models and calls for new paradigms for a new time--and a new place--the “Third World.”

² The errors of complacency stem from the perhaps tendency to congratulate ourselves for the virtues of our liberation (both intellectual and political) . . . (Immanuel Wallerstein, African Studies Association NEWSLETTER, IV, 3, June 1971, p. 5)

³ At the Montreal meetings Johnetta Cole and Willard Johnson, two black activists, proposed a radical transformation of the African Studies Association. “*If the African Studies Association is on the side of the hunter, then let all the cats unite to turn the game around*” (Willard Johnson’s platform statement). The Resolution was eventually defeated by mail ballot and Johnson and Cole resigned:

Continued membership on the Board of an association of people who feel justified in earning their living off the study of peoples held low and made miserable by an order which our country dominates, with no direct and active effort to change that order, is insupportable. (Johnetta B. Cole and Willard R. Johnson, African Studies Association NEWSLETTER, IV, 1, February 14, 1971, p. 3).

⁴ There was a special issue of the ASA NEWSLETTER, February 14, 1971 (Valentine's Day). As a response to cancelled memberships and general malaise and disenchantment within the ASA, the Association pleaded on the cover of this special issue, asking its members to "Be Our Valentine."