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SYMPOSIUM: NORMAN AJARI'S
DARKENING BLACKNESS

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Darkening political theory: negative dialectics and guerilla

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ABSTRACT

This article suggests us to read Norman Ajari's idea of Black Communism as a theoretical and practical proposition for decolonial political theory. I argue that Black Communism should be understood from the perspective of negative dialectics characterized by the experience of failure, of the non-identity between a concept and what it refers to. Thereafter, I will argue that Ajari's strategic relationship between theory and practice can be exemplified by Walter Rodney's idea of "guerilla intellectualism", which I understand as a way to inhabit the space or the distance, between political concepts and what they refer to. My aim here is to expand on Ajari's idea of Black Communism as a way to do decolonial political theory, a doing that does not take 'decolonial' as a metaphor. In other words, it is not a decolonizing of political theory, but it puts political theory as a moment of the decolonial praxis

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Norman Ajari opens *Darkening Blackness* by describing the reception of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the Western political and social contexts. Unsurprisingly, the reception of CRT in France could be characterized by a moral panic about the "racialization" of the debate as a danger for the so-called universal French Republic. Yet, it highlights what is at the core of Ajari's book, the inherent pessimism of the Black Radical tradition. Namely, the "disillusionment, disaffection, even hostility toward liberal democracy and the State" (Ajari 2024, 6). The book shows the distance between the concept, the *hope*ful ideological picture of the Republic as "driven by reform and progress for minorities" (Ajari 2024, 7), and the experience of it leading to *pessimism*. By presenting the Black Radical tradition and putting the emphasis on Afro-American pessimism and Black Male

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Studies from a Pan-African perspective, this book does much more than describe these theories but gives an understanding of the Black Radical tradition from the perspective of its negativity, taken as a power. Indeed, the idea is not to reduce, or synthesize the distance between the inclusive discourse of the Republic and its application. It is rather to start from the negativity of its experience to think of other forms of social organization. The ultimate goal of this book is, I put, to highlight the necessarily deceiving dimensions of politics, whether institutional or in activism, when driven by a principle of unity. Instead, Norman Ajari suggests a politics of negativity characterized as Black Communism, and this is precisely what I will explore in this text. I will discuss Black Communism as a theoretical and practical political proposition.

In discussing Marxism and African liberation, Walter Rodney argued that asking the question of the relevance of Marxism for African liberation is asking "whether an ideology which has historically generated within the culture of Western Europe in the nineteenth century is, today […] still valid for another part of the world" (2022, 36–37). Following the same theoretical and historical questioning, in *Darkening Blackness*, Norman Ajari posits Marxism as a potentially relevant methodological framework for Black studies (2024, 159). Accordingly, it is dialectical Marxism and not Marxist conclusions that matter for Black studies, and arguably for decolonial theoretical-practical perspectives in general. I intentionally go beyond Black studies here as I believe that *Darkening Blackness* has an epistemo-political dimension that can also be useful for decolonial thinking *in general*. Namely, what Norman Ajari calls Black Communism. This idea presented in the book's conclusion is a theoretical and practical suggestion that puts together theory and practice strategically. In this paper, I will suggest understanding and exploring Ajari's Black Communism as a darkening of political theory. I will argue that the centrality of Ajari's thesis is in the idea of negative dialectics and its principle of non-identity. Thereafter, I will argue that Ajari's strategic relationship between theory and practice can be exemplified by Walter Rodney's idea of "guerilla intellectual" (Hill 2015, 111), which I understand as a way to inhabit the space, or the distance, between political concepts and what they refer to. My aim here is to expand on Ajari's idea of Black Communism as a way to *do* decolonial political theory, *a doing* that does not take "decolonial" as a metaphor, which is now common academic practice, but in its materiality. In other words, it is not a decolonizing of political theory, but it puts political theory as a moment of the decolonial praxis.

Why Black Communism? A review of the argument

Norman Ajari introduces his idea of Black Communism in the conclusion, however, rather than a synthesis and a nuanced account of the different theories described throughout the book, this conclusion looks like a

philosophical proposition, an openness to darkening political theory – understood as a political theory centered on the interests of black people. Before getting into my interpretation of Black Communism, I will present Ajari's argument. First, he presents it as a necessary alternative to radical and progressive political theory. Indeed, he starts by describing a tendency to extract Black thoughts and politics from its substance, namely blackness. More precisely, "it has become customary to emphasize, to the point of excluding all other matters, what has the least bearing on Black people themselves or their political interests. The sole focus is often philanthropic acts and alliance building" (Ajari 2024, 153). In other words, Black thoughts and politics are subsumed theoretically and practically under the idea of unity. This logic of extraction is always accompanied by a logic of integration (and coalition), where black people are summoned to integrate a whole, bigger than them. In other words, the Black Radical tradition is characterized by being more than its blackness. This idea of extraction *and* integration illustrates what Ajari calls pessimism, the material and theoretical disposability of black lives for something bigger such as the Republic or a coalition. The extraction/integration dynamic has already been analyzed quite a lot from the perspective of the State, the Republic, Capitalism, etc. *Darkening Blackness* focuses more on this dynamic at play in coalitional politics and the reductionism imposed upon black activism and theory.

This process is, not exclusively, exemplified by the notion of "Indigènes" (Indigenous) in France that is mobilized theoretically and practically in decolonial anti-racist politics and that was theorized by the Mouvement des Indigènes des la République (MIR) created in 2005, that became the Parti des Indigènes de la République (PIR) three years later. As described by Norman Ajari in the book, French racial and anti-racist politics is structured around the question of islamophobia, especially since the early 2000s. For example, the 2004 law on Secularity and Conspicuous Religious Symbols in Schools resulted in banning the wearing of headscarves and veils by students in schools, which also led to the creation of anti-racist organizations and movements in response to it. In this context of increasing Islamophobia, in 2005, the Mouvement des Indigènes de la République was founded and wrote a text to explain French State racism and islamophobia by the persistence of colonialism. From this moment, the notion of "Indigènes[1]" became the category to talk about French non-white people, especially from the post-colonial immigration, as the rallying slogan "we are the Indigènes de la République" testifies. Through their anti-racist and decolonial politics, the PIR participated in setting "the terms for the discussions of race in France, even if this is most often expressed disapprovingly" (Ajari 2024, 132). As a result, "Indigènes" is the unifying category that illustrates or characterizes the new political subjectivity that resists and opposes state Racism. To cut a long story short, the Indigènes politics is based on

building coalitions with French Jews and the white working class (Bouteldja 2016, 2023).

However, this politics of coalition misses an important point. If it is true, as Karen and Barbara Fields argued (2022), that racism precedes race, it should also be emphasized that "racism begins with anti-Blackness" (Ajari 2024, 138). Therefore, blackness cannot be diluted nor subsumed into a category such as "Indigènes" because of its qualitative, and ontological for Ajari and Afropessimists, difference from other forms of racism and racialization. This difference is illustrated by the fact that "the category of *slaves* always already trumps that of *indigènes* [… and renders it] hollow and ineffectual" (Ajari 2024, 140; author's emphasis). The paradox of the theories produced by Houria Bouteldja, who was the spokesperson of the PIR, is that they draw on the work of African-Americans such as James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, yet the main analytic and political category remains indigènes and not slaves. For Ajari, this assimilation of black people to the Indigènes category only works "if Black history is ignored" (2024, 146). As a result, French decolonial politics, as theorized by the PIR, is characterized and moved by a principle of identity, created by the category of Indigènes. This principle of identity is further explored in the main objective which is a politics of coalition between whites and non-whites, hiding, for Ajari, an overly optimistic "radical multiculturalism" (2024, 148). However, since anti-Black racism is the backbone of the French Empire, this ultimately optimistic view cannot work from the perspective of anti-Black racism, precisely because this form of racism is not systematically taken into account nor addressed, mainly because of an "insufficient Black radical consciousness and politics" (Ajari 2024, 150). Accordingly, I believe that it is from this theoretical and political contextual perspective that Ajari's Black Communism must be understood.

Black Communism and negative dialectics

Before discussing Black Communism, Ajari opposed Bouteldja's positive and coalitional "revolutionary love" to a "revolutionary hate" (2024, 151). I think that this idea of "hatred" illustrates well Ajari's Black Communism in its theoretical and practical dimensions. Here, "hatred", can be understood as a form of lucidity, a principle that guides Black Radical theory and praxis. It is from this negativity that Black Communism should be understood, as a form of consciousness that remains lucid about the incapacity of picturing Black (theory and practice of) liberation without focusing on black lives. As Ajari puts it, "Steve Biko, whose work, based on the politicization of the Black consciousness, is key to laying a new foundation for a Black Communism" (2024, 160) Indeed, for Biko, one's state of consciousness cannot be separated from the oppressive structure. He showed that alienated black consciousness, the feeling of inferiority, is a result of colonialism and is cultivated by the

apartheid system in South Africa (2005, 20–21–69). As a result, all the politics of integration, inclusion, etc., block the possibility of black consciousness as it "makes people believe that something is being done when in reality the artificially integrated circles are soporific to the blacks while salving the consciences of the guilty-stricken white" (Biko 2005, 64–65). In other words, the consciousness that Ajari calls for is a form of lucidity about "knowing oneself as oppressed and dehumanized" (2024, 161) and the meaning of this negativity for political praxis and theory. This is why Black Communism, by putting the emphasis on black consciousness, is a theoretical and practical project.

However, I believe that this proposal does not depend on classical Marxist dialectics, but on a negative dialectics. Negative dialectics is moved by a principle of non-identity and does not believe in the ultimate synthesis as one finds in Hegel's and Marx's dialectics. As Adorno had it, "there is a gap between words and the thing they conjure" (2007, 53) In other words, there is always a distance, a non-identity between the concept and what it is supposed to refer to. There are two ways in which this non-identity is expressed. First, when a unitary concept classifies and subsumes differences. In that case, the concept does not properly reflect the particularities of the different objects it refers to. An example would be the category of "Indigènes" that we discussed previously and that does not adequately represent blackness in its qualitative difference from other forms of racialization. The second form is the non-identity between the objects and what they should be (the concept). For instance, the carceral system presents itself as something, whether justice, rehabilitation, etc., but in reality, it is not as such (Gilmore 2007). In that sense, there is a distance between the concepts and the reality it refers to. Accordingly, for Adorno, society is only real in appearance because it pretends to be something that it is not in reality. And it is its essential contradiction. To put it differently, there is a non-identity between the lived experience of society and the concepts we use to describe it. As a result, I put that non-identity is the guiding principle of Ajari's Black Communism and that it illustrates the meaning of pessimism, which can be understood as a political subjectivity characterized by its lucidity about the impossibility of the identity of what society presents itself to be (equal) and what it is (anti-Black).

However, this non-identity is not only towards politics of integration, diversity and inclusion but also about politics that subsume blackness into categories such as "indigènes", as the non-identity, the negation that represents blackness, is concealed by making politics of coalition, so of identity, the starting, and sometimes only, point. It does not mean that coalitions cannot exist at some point, but that if a coalition under a general category is the starting point, it will block the possibility of Black consciousness. Thus, I put that what Ajari defines as black consciousness is the experience

of the distance between the concept and what it refers to. Indeed, a negative dialectic questions the truth of something through the experience of its failure. Black consciousness starts from the experience of the non-identity between a concept, what society claims to be, and the reality of an anti-Black world. Accordingly, there will always be a failure of the concept, whether it is "Indigenes" or "Equality". Therefore, the "revolutionary hate" that Ajari talks about can be associated with Adorno's logic of disintegration. Black consciousness as a result of the failure of the concept due to the "confrontation of concept and thing" (Adorno 2007, 144) leads to a necessary disintegration of the concept in theory. In other words, black consciousness is the experience of a failure, of non-identity.

However, for Ajari, "the aim of Black Communism is to articulate a social project centered on Black dignity, derived from the histories, experiences, and philosophies of Africans and Afrodescendants, taking care to keep their interests as the focal point" (2024, 164). This is why, the history of Black consciousness is important. Authors of the Black Radical tradition experienced this failure and wrote about this experience, such as Cedric Robinson and his account of Black Marxism which can be seen as a political theory that takes non-identity as its guiding principle. The problem of Marxism is the distance, the non-identity of its concepts, and what they supposedly refer to. Indeed, the interests of the white proletariat are not the same as the interests of black people. As Ajari points out, "[b]y confusing Black interests with those of the citizen or the proletariat, liberalism and Marxism stand as two serious obstacles on the road to intellectual and political independence for the Blacks of the world" (2024, 165). Therefore, Black Communism is a contribution to the Black Radical tradition and not to Marxism. It reflects on experiences of Black consciousness as a failure of Marxist concepts to capture the reality of the Black proletariat. This is precisely the theoretical and practical task that Black Communism will take by focusing on Black consciousness. For Ajari Black consciousness is a consciousness of a consciousness, meaning that it is a consciousness of one's history, so of the Black Radical tradition. Black Communism is then about the recovery of "a long tradition of abolitionist, Black nationalist, anti-colonialist, Pan-African philosophy and activism" (Ajari 2024, 161). In other words, is it by confronting one's own intellectual and political tradition that the non-identity of Western concepts and what they refer to can be addressed, not only as a denunciation of Eurocentrism but more fruitfully as a constant reconceptualization according to one's, here Black, experience of failure.

This is what I take to be Ajari's contribution to a decolonial political theory that, moved by a negative dialectics, would systematically address the non-identity of political concepts and what they refer to. However, this theoretical practice is precisely a practice, and cannot only look backward, at what

happened in the past. For Robinson, the Black Radical tradition is "the *continuing development* of a collective consciousness" (2020, 171; my emphasis) meaning that the theorist or philosopher needs a *grounding* (Rodney 1969) within today's struggle.

Negative dialectics and guerilla

As I said previously, while I enjoyed the book as a whole, I am interested in following Ajari's idea of Black Communism and developing it as a way of doing decolonial political theory that goes beyond the common call to "decolonizing X". In doing so, I have first focused on Adorno's negative dialectics which is, I believe, central to Ajari's Black Communism addressing the non-identity of Western concepts and what they refer to, and its role in the formation of Black consciousness. Now, I will argue that Walter Rodney's "guerilla intellectualism" is a way to inhabit this negative dialectics, this distance between the concept and what they refer to, in theory and practice. Before going further, I want to make clear that this is not an attempt to subsume the Black Radical tradition under the "decolonial" as a unified and general category as described and criticized in the previous section, but to see what the Black Radical tradition can teach us about how to *do* theory.

Throughout the book, Ajari describes Black thought, and I would say Black Communism, as an essentially strategic social philosophy. Following Isabelle Garo's account, he defines strategy as a theoretical-practical thinking that "defines its political goals and actions in relation to a set of existing conditions" (Ajari 2024, 101). Indeed, here, Black Communism as a decolonial political theory does not aim at absolute total truth at creating another normative system that would be imposed upon society. Indeed, the quest for absolute truth is premised upon the idea of the identity between concepts and what they refer to, leading to a classificatory system supposed to represent reality. If, as we said, the Black Radical tradition traces the history of Black consciousness, the strategic aspect of a political theory would be, as Robinson put it, the continuing development of consciousness. This questions the role of the political theorists/philosophers within the political and social struggle. Indeed, political theorists cannot solely rely on past experiences of the failure, of the non-identity, of what society pretends to be, its concepts, and what it is in reality. If, in this case, Black consciousness is based on the experience of this failure, it is then somehow praxis that mediates theory. However, if, as Ajari argued, Black consciousness is a consciousness of a consciousness, it means that this first-hand experienced consciousness needs to be reflected on as well.

This specific relationship between theory and practice is, I believe, captured by Walter Rodney's notion of guerilla intellectualism (GI) as an

overcoming of "the false distinction between reflection and action" (Rodney 1969, 64). According to Tunde Adeleke, GI has three dimensions/functions. First, to attack "*distorted* ideas [within one's discipline …] used to legitimize European domination", second, to transcend one's disciplinary focus to "challenge the dominant *social myths in society*", and third to grounding with the masses "gaining useful insights into the *true character of society*" (2000, 41; my emphasis). Those three functions of GI are interesting because they enact Adorno's notion of negative dialectic. Indeed, the "distorted ideas" and "social myths" refer to the two types of non-identities that I described in the previous section, respectively the concept and what society takes itself to be. On the other hand, the "true character of society" is the reality of the object of analysis without subsuming it under a concept or social category. As a result Black Communism, and by extension a decolonial political theory, is not just a commitment to "decolonize X" but to enact, to *do* decolonial political theory as a "partaking of […] the experiences of the masses" (Adeleke 2000, 42), or, as Kieron Turner has it, as "the continuous movement of action, reflection, and theorizing through action within the process of social struggle itself" (2022, 16). Indeed, the role of political theorists is to constantly problematize society, which, in the language of negative dialectics means becoming conscious of the contradictions that sustain society. The process of guerilla intellectualism can be divided into two phases, what Adorno called determinate negation and immanent critique. The former expresses the experience of the failure of the concepts, the coming to consciousness if you will, that is experienced in the social and political struggle. However, the role of the theorist is also to reflect on that experience of failure, leading to the construction of a theory as social critique. In other words, political theorists constantly mediate between theory and practice. Accordingly, the position of guerilla intellectualism is the one able to bring the philosophical wonder necessary for a decolonial political theory. Indeed, pessimism, defined as the experience of failure, of non-identity, is the negative power (Ajari 2024, 159) that creates the philosophical impulse to reflect on the contradictions that sustain society, the necessary colonial dimension of a *post*-colonial society.

Note

1. The term "Indigène" in the French context does not mean the same as "Indigenous" in the Americas and in settler colonial contexts. It refers to the Code de l'Indigénat which was an administrative legal regime imposed upon the native population in French colonial territory such as Algeria. The Indigénat regime discriminates by operating a distinction between nationality and citizenship, where native are considered as French subjects without any rights associated to citizenship. In other words, it is a regime of exception.

Disclosure statement

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