



Caste, Class, and Race by Oliver Cromwell Cox

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Source: *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 115, No. 5 (March 2010), pp. 1664-1669

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/652956)

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Caste, Class, and Race. By Oliver Cromwell Cox. New York: Monthly Review, 1948.

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When Oliver Cox died in 1974, his work seemed poised for success. Methodologically, theoretically, and politically, it spanned a new disciplinary mainstream, for Cox was a historical sociologist of considerable range, a combiner of Marxist and Weberian arguments, and a fearless student of capitalism and racism. Moreover, he was black. Yet his explicit opposition to black nationalism made him unpopular with young African-Americans seeking heroic predecessors, while his isolation from white elites hid him from the young Marxists and historical sociologists who should have rediscovered him.

By the time Cox began to be recognized, the cultural turn was in full swing. To be sure, Cox took a strong constructivist position on race: "A race may be thought of as simply any group of people that is generally believed to be, and generally accepted as, a race in any given area of ethnic competition." But the new race studies found his work unsubtle and overly materialistic. Like so many great writers before him, he was now caught in the reputational doldrums: too old-fashioned to be actively debated, too up-to-date to be retrospectively immortalized. Moreover, contemporary politics continued to drive the American historiography of race, and Cox's militant assimilationism made him as unpopular as denying the African heritage had made E. Franklin Frazier. Such rejection was yet another indignity suffered disproportionately by the black intellectuals of the mid-20th century: only Dubois—a generation older—could be safely admired.

But after 2010 Cox was finally recognized as one of the founding figures of historical sociology and one of the major American theorists of race relations. An autodidact and a maverick, he could not give his works the facility of a Bendix or a Wallerstein, a Frazier or a Myrdal. But they read well nonetheless, their breadth and ambition were extraordinary, and as a result *Caste, Class, and Race* (CCR) is now recognized as one of the most important works of midcentury sociology in the United States.

Oliver Cromwell Cox was born into a middle-class Trinidadian family in 1901. His father and uncle chose to send him to the United States for education, following two of his brothers. Arriving in 1919, Cox went through Chicago's YMCA High School and Crane Junior College, eventually taking his college degree at Northwestern University (B.S.). In 1929, stricken with polio, he gave up longstanding plans for the law and instead took an M.A. in economics (1932) and a Ph.D. in sociology (1938) at the University of Chicago.

Almost all of Cox's career was spent at historically black institutions: Wiley College (1938–44), Tuskegee Institute (1944–49), and Lincoln Uni-

versity (1949–70). At Lincoln, he gave learned lectures and low grades while living in an apartment in the men's athletic dorm, where he fought a perpetual battle for civility and decorum. All the while, this personally conservative man wrote works of broad-ranging knowledge and radical content. His first major work frontally attacked reigning theories of race relations, and he spent the two decades from 1950 to 1970 producing an enormous history of capitalism that achieved the singular feat of being ignored by the new (white) radicals of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Published exactly a century ago, CCR has three sections, as its title suggests. It is a book about different "social systems," in Cox's phrase. But where "social system" meant for Talcott Parsons a set of abstractions adjusted to each other like a complex, self-governing machine, "social system" for Cox meant an actual social world, characterized by particular institutions and social relations. For Cox there are three such systems. The first is the caste system, in which a large number of mutually interdependent endogamous groups are mapped into a status hierarchy that is organized around criteria of purity, but interwoven by reciprocal obligation. Although given groups can move around in the hierarchy, the system as a whole is quite stable. In an estate system, by contrast, there are a relatively small number of statuses in loosely functional relationships. Such "estates" have little internal organization, are not necessarily endogamous, and indeed may see individual members depart for other estates by marriage, good fortune, and so on. When an estate system breaks up, there results a third system, one of "social class," by which Cox does not mean a society of vast horizontal strata, but rather an atomized society of perpetual small-scale individual motion within a set of continuous status rankings. In such a system emerge "political classes," which are organized groups aiming at control of the state. In post-18th-century Europe, these political classes are the capitalists and the proletariat.

Cox's three social systems are thus three actual types of societies, empirically identified and inductively theorized. Only two of these systems appear in the book's title—caste and class. The book's third (race) section argues at length that racial oppression is simply a strong variant of proletarianization and that a racially divided society is simply a particular form of class system.

Although Cox's Trinidadian childhood exposed him to caste among Indians in the West Indies, the caste section of his book is based not on primary data, but on a painstaking review of the scholarly literature. Yet so eminent an authority as the French anthropologist Louis Dumont opined in the magisterial *Homo Hierarchicus* that Cox's analysis of India, although occasionally wrong in details, was correct in all major points. Cox's second section ranges from medieval estates to the New Deal. The class literature proper is, however, discussed only after the basic concepts have already been established by reference to historians and the few theorists (particularly Sombart) whom Cox trusts. Much of the section

treats contemporary class conflict in the United States, in which Franklin Delano Roosevelt emerges as a hero. "Most of what he said and did was really democratic, and consequently socialistic or communistic," Cox tells us.

The final, race section also places analysis before literature. Cox begins with "situations of race relations," a typology of encounters between racial groups. He then distinguishes race prejudice from intolerance (the latter being prejudice against groups that are in a position to change or conceal their identity, unlike races), and nationalistic prejudice (the rubric under which Cox considers anti-Asian prejudice in the United States). There follow two analytic chapters emphatically rejecting the notion that race antagonisms in the United States are castelike.

Only then does Cox turn to the literature on race, which he utterly rejects. First, he attacks the theories of Robert Park (for regarding race antagonism as ancient and inevitable) and Ruth Benedict (for failing to see that ethnocentrism arises from capitalist needs, not from mere cultural difference). Then he attacks the Warner school—source of the "race-is-caste" theory—by name and indeed by page. He then debunks Gunnar Myrdal's analysis of the American race problem for examining race in terms of moral prejudice rather than economic exploitation. The book then closes with a long chapter ("The Race Problem in the United States") that contains a demand for assimilation, a long analysis of lynching, and a curt dismissal of existing Negro leadership, culminating in the astonishing remark, two pages before the end, that "a great leader of Negroes will almost certainly be a white man."

Although published when fewer and fewer monographic works contained their own data, CCR follows the older pattern; sometimes it seems like a commented set of readings (and, given our long retrospect, it is all the more interesting for that). At one point Cox gives three pages of verbatim testimony before the Dies Committee (on un-American activities) to illustrate an argument about class struggle. At another, he provides the exact amounts of *wergild* for various kinds individuals in the Kingdom of Wessex in prefeudal times. Indeed, the footnotes—1,400 of them in total—provide an ongoing commentary on the text, on scholarly and popular knowledge, and on the complex personality of their author. They include quotes from not only the code of Manu, the Mahabharata, and Cox's major scholarly sources, but also from (among others) Plato, Aristotle, Columbus, Burke, Rousseau, Danton, Jefferson, Tocqueville, Lord Acton, James Bryce, William Graham Sumner, Gustav Schmoller, Marx, Bukharin, Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, Pius XI, the Webbs, Lloyd George, Ghandi, Nehru, Toynbee, Schweitzer, Veblen, Booker T. Washington, Sun Yat-sen, Josef Goebbels, Adolf Hitler, Harold Laski, Charles Beard, Calvin Coolidge, Friedrich Hayek, Henry A. Wallace, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, William Randolph Hearst, C. Wright Mills, Leonard Woolf, Jacques Barzun, Robert Redfield, and W. E. B. Dubois. It may seem silly to list all these names (and these are simply the well known), but they

are a testament to a brave and catholic mind, following its own pathway through the vast library of recorded social thought.

Cox was at times cavalier about sources, but at other times quite critical, indeed often sarcastic. He speaks of "McIver's confusion of status and political class." Donald Young's ideas are "highly questionable." Guy B. Johnson, "guided by the idea of Warner's caste line . . . goes into the following monstrosity." Pitirim Sorokin gives "a different statement but an equally faulty approach." Discussing one of his favorite targets (*Deep South* by the Warner group) he remarks: "An ideally incomprehensible definition [of class] is the following: 'a social class is the largest group of people who have intimate access to one another.' . . . One might as well set himself the task of determining where the sky begins as to go out with such a definition, say, in Chicago, to locate social classes."

Reading the text, one gets a very distinct picture of Cox: alone, scholarly, embittered, his mind awash with learning and anger, deeply devoted to an insight that only he can see. There is, by the way, no race loyalty in Cox's handling of sources: Romanzo Adams, Charles Johnson, Franklin Frazier, and Allison Davis get the same treatment as Pitirim Sorokin, Lloyd Warner, Robert Park, and Ruth Benedict. Nor is there Chicago loyalty. Indeed, the treatment of Robert Park is not only negative but uncharitable, ignoring Park on the race relations cycle and assimilation, the main places where he agrees with Cox. Toward Lloyd Warner, Cox is both merciless and contemptuous.

One wonders, indeed, if Cox felt so isolated that he thought he had nothing to lose. Perhaps he was already en route to the resentment that produced his vitriolic denunciation in the 1960s of the most famous black sociologist of his era. In that denunciation are mixed grudging respect, judicious criticism, and deepest anger. Cox says point-blank that Frazier "sold out" and that he (Cox) understands why, but cannot forgive him. That such bitterness divided two of black America's best minds underscores the power of the racial regime that produced these self-defeating enmities among its opponents.

Yet Cox's passion and commitment—as well as a curious, hidden optimism—sing out in page after page of CCR. The Bible is not seldom cited and the book's epigraph is from the Gospel of Matthew. And like all true socialists, Cox is confident that the proletarian state will be different. He does not see that communist dictatorship will not wither away, and he certainly doesn't expect planning to go away: "A stateless society need not be a planless society." Like John Dewey (whom he elsewhere condemns), he thinks social scientists will serve a "most desirable function" in planning a socialist society. It is a sunny future.

Although Cox sees clearly the dangers inherent in the opposition of socialism and nationalism, he does not however see the force that undid socialism in the end. Bismarck and his social insurance are never mentioned. William Beveridge makes only a brief appearance. The tentative socialism of postwar Britain is treated with amused indulgence. The ideas

that capitalism might adapt some aspects of socialism and that, by the year 2000, transfer payments would amount to 10% of American GDP never occurred to Cox. This is perhaps one of the reasons the book was ignored for so long.

CCR was roundly attacked on its publication. The premier race journal of the time, *Phylon*, solicited its review from Everett Hughes, who damned the book for moralizing, for arguments *ad homines*, and for idealizing classical India. In the *Journal of Negro History* Howard University's Williston Lofton charged Cox with excessive Marxism, with misinterpreting secondary evidence on India, and with sounding like "a medieval mystic or the late Gertrude Stein." In *The Annals*, Henry Pratt Fairchild of New York University rejected the Indian comparison altogether and attacked Cox's penchant for idiosyncratic definitions. The *American Journal of Sociology* review was written by G. S. Ghurye, of Bombay University, a respected expert on caste, who found Cox's understanding of caste simple-minded. In the *Journal of Negro Education*, Allison Davis attacked what he called "mystical sociology," in a review as angry and spiteful as Cox's own comments about Davis's *Deep South*.

These negative voices were quite predictable. Cox had attacked Warner's "caste and race" theory with hammer and tongs, and Hughes was at the time Warner's closest collaborator. Davis was a Warner student and collaborator. The *American Journal of Sociology* was the house journal of Warner's department, and its editors cannot have been unaware of that a caste specialist would find flaws in a synthetic work by a non-specialist. Cox's belief that the discipline—and Chicago in particular—was biased against him is clearly borne out.

But there were positive voices. In the *American Sociological Review* Samuel Blizard summarized the book carefully and praised its immense breadth, although he noted that "further rumination might have improved [Cox's] presentation." *Social Forces* reviewer Mozell C. Hill summarized the book carefully, and, while he was worried about seemed to him Cox's conceptual carelessness, ultimately judged the book a major—perhaps even a seminal—work that "attempts to transcend the obvious and penetrate radically into the nature of social dynamics."

In the event the book was ignored. Where Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma* became one of the most visible works of 20th-century sociology, CCR nearly vanished. It had a slight vogue in the 1970s and 1980s, the first decades of black radicalism in the United States, but even so averaged only a small fraction of the visibility of its highly funded opponent. Unlike Myrdal's book, too, Cox's was visible mostly within the race relations journals and within the disciplines of sociology and ethnic/race relations.

Yet CCR has several important messages for a reader today. The first is that it is always possible and often necessary to step back and take a large view. No one agreed with Oliver Cox at the time he wrote: not other black intellectuals, not the white people who had helped train him, certainly not the larger political world he skewered. Yet he wrote anyway.

His work simply grew more and more comprehensive, more and more adventurous. Cox's bitterness and solitude leaked into his work, but they don't hide the bold design and the ambitious comparisons. We now see that it was Cox who in many ways was the American heir of Weber, Sombart, Schumpeter, and the German comparative historical tradition, just as it was Cox who was the American heir of Tawney, Brailsford, Hobson, Laski, Strachey, the Webbs, and the other British socialists whose names pervade his footnotes.

Second, the book was oddly prescient. For all the angry reviews, Cox's account of class struggle in the 1930s, his analysis of the relation between business and academics, and his discussion of the implications of the emerging security state are quite close to the standard historical account given today. One wonders, indeed, if the book might not have been a popular success if it had been cut in half and shorn of its needless personal attacks, although to be sure it is just as likely that such changes would have made the book's radicalism much more evident and led to suppression rather than inattention.

Third, the book is important for its insistence on the arbitrariness of race as a model for difference. Cox knew racial oppression and hated it. But he hated class oppression more. And he could envision the possibility of a hierarchy that was not oppressive in the Western sense. The contradictions between these things are unresolved in CCR, as they still are in contemporary society. But Cox faced them squarely, without the tortured answers through which many liberals squared their consciences. It is to Cox and a few others like him that contemporary sociology owes the sophisticated account of difference we are developing today, an account that explicitly theorizes the intersections of differences permanent and impermanent, regular and irregular, vertical and horizontal. Cox's answers are not ours. His impatience and bitterness are not ours. But his hopes, his breadth, and his honesty are a shining example. To read *Caste, Class, and Race* is to recover the passions that drive us all.