

The History of the Black Radical Tradition

Definitions

Collective ownership: All members of a society have shared responsibility and ownership of goods and services provided.

Marxism: A political ideology based on the ideas of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Marxism advocates for a practice of collective ownership of the means of production and distribution of goods towards the establishment of a classless society

Means of production: Resources, material, or capital (money) required to produce goods and services.

What is the Black radical tradition?

The Black radical tradition describes the unique demonstrations of revolutionary, emancipatory thought throughout history by Black people affected by slavery, racism, colonialism, and imperialism. Across the shared experiences of the African diaspora, a common thread of activism can be found. Cedric Robinson, in his book, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, argues that the spirit and character of revolutionary thought can be traced back to African beliefs, customs, and values.

People usually think about Black resistance as a result of their situation of oppression (as slaves for example) rather than a demonstration of common values and ideas about liberation. Instead, *the Black radical tradition helps us envision and identify the legacies of radical action in the Black community to achieve a specific goal*. It is also important to recognize that as enslaved peoples and victims of colonialism, Black people have never been submissive or passive about their condition in white supremacist society.

Evidence of the Black Radical Tradition in History

- **The Maroons** - Various communities of formerly enslaved, self-liberated people that span from the plantations of America to South America to Jamaica. Maroons created their own communities on the fringes of colonies, often raiding and attacking colonial strongholds.
- **Haitian Revolution** - Saint Domingue, now known as Haiti, was the richest French colony. Enslaved labor produced several cash crops such as sugar, cotton, indigo, and coffee which funded the French empire. In the late 1700s, social strife and conflict broke out between the various racial castes and political groups in Haitian society, intensified by the French Revolution of 1789. Enslaved people in Saint Domingue, led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, overthrew slavery and French colonial rule. As a result, Haiti achieved independence from the French and became the first country founded by former slaves.
- **Slave rebellions in the Americas** - Slave rebellions took place all over the Americas. In Veracruz, Mexico Gaspar Yanga facilitated the escape of many slaves from a sugar plantation. Nat Turner, an enslaved man who had escaped and learned how to read and write, led a violent uprising in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831. Turner's rebellion,

which is known in history, led to the deaths of 55 mainly white people in the town. Although his legacy is controversial, Turner demonstrates how enslaved people attempted to overthrow the institution of slavery. Denmark Vesey, a similar figure, planned a rebellion of enslaved people in Charleston, South Carolina.

Inspired by the slave insurrection that led to the Haitian Revolution, Vesey hoped to execute white slaveowners, liberate Charleston, and then, escape to Haiti. The plan, however, was sabotaged by informants, leading to the trial and conviction and state execution of Vesey remains an important figure in the history of slave rebellions. Also in South Carolina, there was the Stono Rebellion when in 1739, an Angolan slave Jemmy organized a rebellion of 20 slaves on the Stono river. Raiding a nearby store, Jemmy and his band armed themselves before being caught and incarcerated.

- **Amistad Mutiny** - There were also insurrections on slave ships. In one such rebellion, near the coast of Cuba in 1839, 53 kidnapped slaves aboard the Amistad seized the ship from their Spanish masters. After 63 days of attempting to return to Cuba, the Amistad ship landed in New York where the US federal government took charge of the ship. Following a contentious legal battle between Spain and the various levels of US judiciary, the Supreme Court declared the slaves to be free under the law. Having been kidnapped from Africa, they were not to be held to Spanish laws that declared them as slaves. The freedmen sailed back to Africa on a ship called the *Gentleman*.
- **Underground Railroad** - One of the most well-known instances of rebellion against slavery, the Underground Railroad was a network of physical passageways through rivers, canals, ferries, and land routes northward into free territories.

How have Black people critiqued Western radical thought?

Marxism is a popular critique of capitalism but is still Eurocentric. It does not address the other experiences of oppression including racial, gendered, and imperialist violence. The Black radical tradition in this way exists as an identifiable way of how Black people have come together for radical knowledge creation that challenges systems of oppression. This tradition has also boldly inserted and interpreted revolutionary ideas within the context of Black people's histories and lived experiences.

Why is understanding the history of Black people in radical movements important to Black liberation?

The Black radical tradition can help us trace the deep legacy of Black resistance against the oppressive structures of racism, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. For a long time, Black people, both in Africa and in the diaspora have been denied history. Slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and the white supremacy necessary to uphold these institutions have severed the ties that Black people have to their history and culture.

Black Radical Tradition in the 21st century

In the protests that continue against state violence through the police, it is important to recognize how the Black radical tradition has continued to flourish in our time. Resistance is all around us in the form of mutual aid and collective education that disrupts the current dominant narrative.

Exploratory Questions

1. Where do you see the Black radical tradition continuing in the 21st century? Can you think of any specific examples?
2. What do you think are the roots of the common values, beliefs, and traditions that stimulate the Black radical tradition? How do you see these characteristics reproduced and exhibited in Black culture?
3. How can we prioritize women and LGBTQ+ Black people in our Black radical work?



COALITION