The Unfinished Genesis of Literary Radicalism: A Response to Clevis Headley and Melanie Otto

Duane C. Edwards, University of the West Indies-Cave Hill,
duane.edwards@cavehill.uwi.edu

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My recent paper published (2019) in *Social Epistemology* has attracted responses from Clevis Headley and Melanie Otto working respectively in the areas of Africana Philosophy and Literature. The fact that an essay on two 20th century Caribbean intellectuals evoked critical responses from two professors in different parts of the globe suggests something about the continued relevance of the intellectual legacy handed down to us by these two Caribbean intellectual giants. Moreover, it raises questions of the global nature of contemporary problems and the possibility that solutions to these problems could very well emerge from other sides of the global community. This is significant since it challenges the idea that the epistemic core of global goal setting is principally the preserve of the economic and technological giants. These broad implications aside, the current response will focus on what seems to be a common bone of contention in the two responses.

My main argument in the paper is that although both Wilson Harris and Walter Rodney vouchsafed to us contemporarily relevant radical ideas, Harris' radicalism goes deeper as it confronts the very epistemic foundation of social order and social structures. For it to be socially transformative, however, it must find a way of being diffused to a large cross-section of the population, hence Rodney's groundings. In fusing Rodney and Harris, my main aim is to tease out a model of change particularly applicable to the Caribbean region. Though both Headley and Otto applauded the attempt to fuse the worlds of two Caribbean intellectual giants, they are of the view that Harris's radicalism stands on its own as a truly radical praxis without the need for the functional crutches provided by Rodney's. Headley opines that Harris is of the view that social change could occur from simply giving new meaning to the brutal existent facts: it is strictly speaking a hermeneutic undertaking. Otto on the other hand argues that although Harris focuses on the life of the imagination and the hermeneutic practices therein, any attainment of the imaginative heights envisioned by Harris would naturally lead to social and political change.

> In other words, the aim of art is to shift the way we imagine the world we live in. In fact, true political change will follow naturally out of what Harris calls "iteracy" of the imagination (1999, 75). The potential of the creative arts to facilitate such literacies of the imagination is the real political challenge in our contemporary world (Otto 2019).

Apart from these two points, there is no fundamental disagreement between the two authors and I with regards to our treatment of Harris. Where we seem to differ is in my claim that the literary radicalism of Harris is incomplete; that it needs the socio-political praxi of Rodney to be socially transformative. The authors are of the view that the literary radicalism of Harris needs no supporting crutches; it is radical in and of itself. I on the other hand view Harris and Rodney as not only pursuing complementary projects as acknowledged by Headley, but as also providing complementary approaches. And, therefore, without each other, by being read separately and in opposition, what we have are unfinished genesis, incomplete approaches to social change.

In response to Headley and Otto, I will emphasize three points. First, Harris' hermeneutic approach needs Rodney's street level praxis. Harris recognizes the dialogical character of the process of individual fulfillment. It is this dialogical process that Rodney refers to as 'groundings'. Secondly, there is no automaticity between self-awareness and political change. Individuals and groups exist within larger social networks and structures and while it is possible for the behavior of the enlightened to bring about qualitative changes to existing social structures, the opposite is equally likely: social structures resist change and consolidate a mode of behavior which perpetuates the status quo. Thirdly, based on the two previous points, Harris' literary, textual approach is best interpreted as representative of the kinds and depth of critique which could be replicated in other areas of social and political life.

Harris and Social Reality

One gets a sense, if one is willing to do the laborious work of piecing together the *disjecta membra* of his dreamworld activities, that Harris sees social reality as being made up of epistemic facts operating on an ontic layer higher than that of the social order and social facts. He refers to these as prepossessions within our civilization. These prepossessions inhere in and are masked by social structures. As such they hardly become the objects of critique and targets of change. Literature, particularly the kinds promoted by Harris, problematizes the epistemic. On the other hand, political protest targets the social structure and social facts and leave their epistemic foundation intact. Political protest thereby becomes complicit in that which it seeks to dismantle; it becomes complicit in the consolidation of the usual. It is based on this conceptualization of social reality that Harris targets the *epistemes*.

For Harris this is best done through literature and literary critique. Harris makes the distinction between persuasively changing the social order and dialogically engaging in attempts to contribute to the open capacity of the person. The latter is prior to the former, as all social order has a totalitarian kernel so a change from one to the other does not necessarily represent a fulfillment of the inner need for freedom. Freedom could be assured when the person is imaginatively open minded to the extent that he or she recognizes the provisional nature of any social order. And, it is for this reason that Harris focuses his intellectual effort on encouraging literacy of the imagination.

His entire literary approach was informed by this need to target the popular imagination. With his collection of dream books (novels) Harris inverts the normal relationship between author (as textual authority) and reader (expected to follow a logical, linear storyline explicitly worked out by the author). By so doing, Harris places his readers in the position of psycho-analyst by deluging them with the *disjecta membra* of his dreamworld activities. They are expected, therefore, to read and creatively (re)construct their own storyline. They are expected to read with both imagination and reason and apply meanings and interpretations not necessarily or consciously intended by the author.

This is similar to the approach to history taken up by Kamua Brathwaite in which it is claimed that he places his readers in the position of an historian by deluging them with

sometimes contradictory and unlabeled citations from which they are expected to make sense (Rosenberg 2007).

But does this constitute, or is intended as, a theory of social action and change, or is it simply representative of the kinds of creativity which must attend other areas of social life? Does Harris contend that genuine social change requires a literary approach as opposed to or exclusive of an activist approach? Or is Harris using his theorizing in the field of literature to shed light on the quality of activism which should be undertaken in other areas of social life?

Harris' reference to the dialogical nature of individual transformation shows that he was not impervious to the importance of groundings as a praxis. Although he no doubt stresses the importance of the interiority of consciousness and a self-confessional approach to social change, he recognizes the value of the dialogical character of self-awareness and awakening. The problem with Rodney is that he employed this dialogical approach to contest social structures while leaving the essential epistemic foundations of those structures in place.

No Automaticity between Self-Awareness and Social Change

While I understand the extreme importance of the imagination and arts of the imagination to individual awakening, I am also cognizant of the fact that the connection between individual awakening and social change is not as straightforward. Societies are made up of powerful groups with interests that go against any large scale diffusion of self-awareness and its concrete activation in society. And, those powerful groups influence the activation of social structures and social facts which accord with those interests. Moreover, those groups influence arts that appeal less and less to the imagination and more and more to the base appetite.

Harris concedes this point in his essay, 'Tradition and the West Indian Novel' in which he traced the origin of the conventional novel to the rise of social configurations in Europe which were involved in the consolidation of class and other interests.[1] Therefore, while he does not discount the need to respond to the '...overpowering and salient features' of this plane of existence, he argues that priority should be given to the 'awakening' of the individual. The term 'priority' used here should not be read as if there is any degree of automaticity between the awakening of the individual and the transformation of social structures.

Method or Metaphor?

Bearing the above in mind, should we read Harris as championing an approach to change in which literary radicalism could bring about the kinds of social and political change necessary for human freedom and fulfillment? Or, should we read him in a more figurative, metaphoric way. A way in which his literary radicalism applied in the area literature could serve as an example of the kinds of activism which is possible even in the area of politics?

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[1] See pg. 140, *Unfinished Genesis.*

Does his insistence on literature or the arts of the imagination amounts to a theory of socio-political change that discounts the value of targeting existing social structures? Or is it that his hermeneutic strategy in the area of literature could and should be replicated in other areas of social life in order to effect political and social change? I argue the latter. And, I do so by calling to my aid a social scientist and activist who in fact applied to the social the kinds of radicalism Harris accomplished in the textual.

Similar to Harris, Castoriadis was very critical of the determinist imaginary; for him it acts as a prison house of the creative imaginary. It acts as an occluding mechanism which plugs any opening for the free expression of the creative imaginary. The determinist imaginary, which finds its highest expression in functionalism and structuralism, crucial to western thought serves as an obstacle to grasping a mode of being that is creative and self-instituting. Castoriadis argues that though society is necessarily composed of functional relations, there is also symbolic and imaginary dimensions of every social relations that are not reducible to the functional dimensions. Though human beings collaborating in transforming raw materials to use values is an essential component of social life, it is not its only component or its dominant component for that matter. Social reality has three dimensions which are all interwoven with each other: the imaginary, symbolic and functional. Neither of these three dimensions are reducible to each other.

Against the functionalist/structuralist, Castoriadis does not consider the goal-oriented, functional moment as the primary component of action because it constitutes only the technical moment of an activity that requires the setting of conditions, goals, and means. It requires what Harris refers to as 'prepossessions', the epistemic foundation of all actions. Castoriadis convincingly argues against the functionalists who claim that action results from the functional requirements of systems and also against the structuralists who claimed that any meaning attached to action are produced out of a combination of signs.

So, for Castoriadis the symbolic and imaginary are left uncriticsed while we become victims of the immediate functional aspects of social structures and we orient our actions and thinking towards those social structural requirements. We become locked in certain functional modes and become enslaved by their immediacies and stringencies. While social action become preoccupied with these functional immediacies, the imaginary aspect of society is left as the prevailing, uncriticised hegemony. The last dream, in this case the Western European dream of a globalised capitalist society, therefore becomes the dominant, normalised, and naturalised dream. It is thus that alienation occurs. More than being alienated from labour and the products of labour, we become also alienated from the freedom to invent and institute—the freedom to imagine.

> Alienation occurs when the imaginary moment in the institution becomes autonomous and predominates, which leads to the institution's becoming autonomous and predominating with respect to society . . . in other words (society) does not recognize in the imaginary of institutions something that is its own product (Castoriadis 1987, 132).

Genuine social change occurs when all aspects of society are problematized - when the imaginary aspects become as much a casualty of the radical imaginary as the structural aspects become of the radical critique and activism. Harris' focus on literature, therefore, should not be read as involving any overarching theory of change that trivialises social activism and political protest, but as offering guidance for more imaginative ways of confronting social and political realities.

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