

The Persistence of the Political: On Cedric J. Robinson's *The Terms of Order*

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American political science has occasionally been punctuated by moments of crisis and reorientation, prompting segments of the discipline to reexamine their dominant presuppositions and to initiate subtle but important shifts in its conceptual and discursive matrices. Perhaps the most important such moment was during the late 1960s, which saw a fusion of distinct crises: the economic downturn at the tail end of the postwar boom; the repercussions of American imperialism on domestic politics; and the emergence of myriad emancipatory, anti-systemic “new social movements” composed of struggles that challenged the Cold War hegemonic project forged in the previous decades.

Observing those conflagrations, many of the leading scholars of the field, often sympathetic to Great Society liberalism, voiced their concerns about the shortcomings of that project. American democracy was now exercising a “terrifying violence” of the powerful against the weak “in the name of freedom and order” both abroad and at home, wrote Barrington Moore Jr.¹ For David Easton, “fear of the nuclear bomb, mounting internal cleavages in the United States in which civil war and authoritarian rule have become frightening possibilities, [and] an undeclared war in Vietnam” were all contributing to “increasing social conflict and deepening fears and anxieties.”² Under this duress, the behavioral movement that had peaked earlier in the decade could no longer sustain its scientific aspirations. Within a few years, the discipline drifted toward a post-paradigmatic condition that arguably

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1. Barrington Moore, Jr., “Thoughts on Violence and Democracy,” *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 29 (1968): 1–12.

2. David Easton, “The New Revolution in Political Science,” *American Political Science Review* 63 (1969): 1051–61, at 1053.

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still defines it today, as illustrated by the debate surrounding the *perestroika* movement in the early 2000s and its subsequent legacy.³

As Moore and Easton were making these pronouncements, Cedric J. Robinson was commencing his dissertation thesis, “Leadership: A Mythic Paradigm,” which he would complete as a Leverhulme Fellow at the University of Sussex in 1970–71.⁴ By the time that it appeared as *The Terms of Order* in 1980, the revanchist backlash to the Civil Rights movement and the New Left had gotten the upper hand on the national political stage. *The Terms of Order* thoroughly bears the marks of this period. Its goal of interrogating the dominant paradigms of Western social science and political thought resonated in a moment when these fields were internally questioning their own methodological, epistemic, and ontological grounds, while externally they were coming under increasing strain from the counter-countercultural reaction. In that sense, it is a work produced out of, and speaking to, a set of crisis conditions that made it possible.

As a recently “rediscovered” contribution to the growing body of scholarship on the genealogy of political science, and an artifact of a specific time in that discipline’s history, *The Terms of Order* is a rich and provocative text. Robinson not only set out to critique the discipline of political science but to demonstrate how our very experience of the political as modern subjects rests on ideological and epistemological underpinnings that are socially constructed and historically contingent. Ambitious in the way that first books occasionally are, its stated purpose is no less than to “expose the historical and philosophical foundations of the myth of social order which compel dependence on tradition-bound forms of authority.”⁵ Robinson argues that the modes of thought characteristic of Western modernity mystify the phenomenological experiences of community and collectivity by imposing authoritative frameworks of social coherence and organization. This desire for social order is transposed by social theorists and the entire lineage of modern Western thought (bourgeois and radical alike) onto the political, through which it appears as the basic ordering principle in society and the product of “extraordinary” political authority and leadership. Robinson sees the political as having become “a basic

3. Kristen Renwick Monroe, ed., *Perestroika! The Raucous Rebellion in Political Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); and Sanford F. Schram and Brian Caterino, eds., *Making Political Science Matter: Debating Knowledge, Research, and Method* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006). See also the Reflections Symposium on *perestroika* in *Perspectives on Politics* 12 (2015): 408–30.

4. Jared Loggins, “Cedric Robinson’s Radical Democracy,” *The Nation* (May 2, 2022), <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/cedric-robinson-essays/>.

5. Cedric J. Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016 [1980]), xxix.

grammar, a mediation, through which the outlines of social reality have been generated;" it is *both* "an instrument for ordering society and that order itself."⁶ In other words, the political has become a self-justifying and self-referential phenomenon, acting as both its own cause and effect in an alienated, circular logic that further mystifies the void that is actually at its center.

Robinson contends that the paradigms upon which much of modern social theory rests cannot provide a satisfactory justification for their own existence without some ultimate recourse to myth, secularized theology, and charismatic leadership. The latter is a carryover from prescientific Western modes of thought, and to this day remains "the metaphysical base for those who think about or experience society in political terms."⁷ Advocates of political society and political order, among them Max Weber and his twentieth-century structural-functionalist disciples, could not rationally ground their systems in the phenomenon of charismatic leadership, since the rationalization through which the charismatic figure is transformed into a leader merely reasserts the hierarchical logic of order, compulsion, and mastery. "Political authority is the alienation of the mass authority of charisma," writes Robinson.⁸ This ultimate groundlessness of our conceptual frameworks persists, thanks to the reified phenomena of bourgeois market society—namely, the market economy and the state.⁹

Robinson grounds his own vantage point from which to critically interrogate the structures of political order by rejecting both "normal" social scientific paradigms (pluralist democracy, elite theory, structural-functionalism) and counterhegemonic radical frameworks (Marxism and anarchism.) Instead, he turns to a heterogeneous array of "counter-sciences" such as psychoanalysis (Freud, Reich), semiology (Lévi-Strauss, Foucault), and anthropology (Geertz, Godelier). Robinson selectively deploys these frameworks to defamiliarize the dominant analytical and ordering constellation of Western social science and political thought. In exposing the myths underlying political order, authority, and leadership, he thus attempts to open an epistemic space for the validity of "alternative constructions of reality."¹⁰

What might these alternative constructions be? While Robinson is sympathetic to the anarchist tradition, he nevertheless stresses that nineteenth-century anarchist ideologies "developed as a specific negation to the evolution of a political

6. Ibid., 7.

7. Ibid., 109.

8. Ibid., 156.

9. Ibid., 71.

10. Ibid., 29.

authority—the State” and its mystification of economic relations.¹¹ As much as they struggled to break out of the mold of political authority, anarchists failed “to disengage meaningfully from the existential boundaries and force of their own experience, [for] their conceptualizations of social order had identical epistemological and metaphysical foundations to that which they sought to oppose.”¹²

But what is then the epistemic vantage point from which Robinson exposes the myth of leadership? Having cast aside seemingly all the dominant frameworks of thought in modern social theory, Robinson looks for a source *external* to the Western tradition: the social practices of the Ila-Tonga people of contemporary Zambia and the surrounding region. Robinson draws on ethnographic and anthropological studies to highlight the Tonga’s kinship-based customs of organic cooperation, the mutual constitution of individual and community, and the social ethic that “all are equally incomplete.” He suggests that had only, through some historical contingency, the latter come to occupy the place held by the discourse of inequality in Western metaphysics, it would do no less than to “bring to human society a paradigm subversive to political authority as the arche-typical resolution, as the prescription for order.”¹³ In the Ila-Tonga’s social practices, Robinson sees a more authentically democratic, because nonpolitical and egalitarian, mode of existence.¹⁴ For him, the Tonga’s metaphysics of kinship represent a “perceptual and conceptual negation . . . capable not merely of cohering a political challenge to political authority as an epistemology and as a system of social order, but more important, project[ing] an alternative epistemology and a postrevolutionary system of integration.”¹⁵

Perhaps not surprisingly, when these ideas were first sketched out in Robinson’s thesis, they did not sit well with his doctoral committee at Stanford, leading to the resignation of two members, Gabriel Almond and Alexander George, and nearly a four-year delay before approval.¹⁶ Upon its publication, *The Terms of Order* was passed over in silence by the discipline: the book was not reviewed in the *American Political Science Review*, nor in any other journal of the field.

11. *Ibid.*, 160.

12. *Ibid.*, 185.

13. *Ibid.*, 197.

14. Chuck Morse and Cedric J. Robinson, “Capitalism, Marxism, and the Black Radical Tradition: An Interview with Cedric Robinson,” *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory* 3 (1999): 7–9.

15. Robinson, *Terms*, 202.

16. Loggins, “Cedric Robinson’s Radical Democracy”; Robin D. G. Kelley, “Cedric J. Robinson: The Making of a Black Radical Intellectual,” *CounterPunch.org* (June 17, 2016), <https://www.counterpunch.org/2016/06/17/cedric-j-robinson-the-making-of-a-black-radical-intellectual/>; and Joshua Myers, *Cedric Robinson: The Time of the Black Radical Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Polity 2021).

The Terms of Order is an ambitious book, anticipating later scholarship critical of the “givenness” of the state and political order in political thought.¹⁷ I cannot do it justice in its entirety here, nor to its relationship to the rest of Robinson’s oeuvre, but only provide some observations that may enable political and social theorists, as well as historians of the social sciences, to further engage with this neglected text. Since Robinson treated the disciplinary matrix of twentieth-century political and social science as his starting point for investigating the “extraordinary persistence of the paradigm of social order understood as political order,” I focus on that part of the book as the basis of my own critique.¹⁸

Concerning the origins of this disciplinary thinking, Robinson sees the history of American political science as “implicated in the historical process of the emergence of the modern State from its Late Feudal and Medieval antecedents.”¹⁹ He maintains that the Western consciousness of the political—and its concomitant concepts order, power, and authority—“emerged through the historical condition of the predominance of the state as an ordering instrument.”²⁰ Thus, the legacy of state-thinking in political science and its persistence within this paradigm has been overdetermined by the very processes of the formation and development of the state. Political science formalizes and systematizes—and thereby mystifies—this historical process.

This is a valuable insight—one that is now largely accepted by political theorists and disciplinary historians alike. Certainly, we can agree that understanding the “theoretical conservativeness of political science requires a consciousness of the historical interaction between ideas and the social institutions and structures of Western civilization.”²¹ Unfortunately, the book prioritizes uncovering the underlying ideological and metaphysical contradictions of Western systems of thought, over tracing how these were manifested in concrete institutional and ideological systems of power. One might recall the genesis of the original dichotomy between state and civil society, as described by Marx and Engels in the *German Ideology*, or perhaps the famous discussion of so-called primitive accumulation in *Capital*.

17. See for example Jens Bartelson, *The Critique of the State* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001); David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State* (Malden, MA: Wiley, 2002); Gurinder K. Bhambra, “The State: Postcolonial Histories of the Concept,” in Robbie Shilliam and Olivia Rutazibwa, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics* (London, UK: Routledge), 200–2090; and Mark Neocleous, *Imagining the State* (Berkshire, UK: Open University Press, 2003).

18. Robinson, *Terms of Order*, 104.

19. Ibid., 22.

20. Ibid., 34.

21. Ibid., 21–22.

During this transition to the capitalist mode of production, the discourse of the political was gradually displaced and appropriated into the discourse of the state.²² Yet these moments, where the historical “interaction” between ideas and civilizational structures led to the emergence of the consciousness of the political vis-à-vis the formation of the state, are passed over by Robinson here (something he would later attempt to remedy with *Black Marxism*’s discussion of the constitutive presence of racial thinking in both feudal and capitalist social relations.) As a result, the historical elements of the formation of the political are largely overshadowed by its deconstructive critique of modern discourses of leadership, authority, and order.

Here we may also consider Robinson’s treatment of democracy. Even as he points to the structural continuities in the notion of *democratic rule*, Robinson is careful not to conflate classical Greek and modern conceptions of *democracy*. Insofar as democracy constituted the “disciplinary matrix” of Western political science in the mid-twentieth century, Robinson took aim at its specific theorization in contemporary scholarship, such as in the work of Robert Dahl.²³ Robinson is correct to note that the pluralist theory of democracy which anchored postwar political science replaced the notion of “the people” with interest groups and their representatives with elites.²⁴ In the wake of the midcentury experience of political *disorder* and total war, identifying “democracy” with the mass societies of the West was a flattening conceptual move that transferred authority from the people to a “machinery of governing.” Such a project borrowed the symbols of democratic legitimacy all the while updating the pathological distrust of the people dating back to classical Greek political thought.²⁵

Robinson is certainly right that theories of behavioralism and pluralism were instances of a broader ensemble of social relations—that which he calls the “total institutions of Western society: disciplines, modern political parties, State bureaucracies, and the scientific establishment.”²⁶ Yet uncovering the structural relationships between these modern institutions, as well as the social forces that brought them into existence, is precisely what holds the key for understanding how they generate the consciousness of the political within specific historical eras, social formations, and conjunctures.

22. Quentin Skinner, “The State,” in Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson, eds., *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 90–131.

23. Robinson, *Terms of Order*, 21.

24. *Ibid.*, 21, 20.

25. *Ibid.*, 13, 20.

26. *Ibid.*, 129.

One could legitimately argue that establishing these concrete forms is less important than demonstrating their persistence across time and indeed, civilizations. But the concrete matters precisely because particularities, differences, and variations can serve as the basis for theoretical comparison and analysis. The absolutist state of the seventeenth century is not the same as the liberal-capitalist state of the nineteenth century and the monopoly capitalist state of the “mass societies” of the mid-twentieth century. Likewise, in focusing on the metaphysics of “the political” and its connection to the abstraction of “the modern state,” we risk collapsing important differences between and across the various social forms through which political authority, leadership, and order emerged and became embedded in the Western consciousness. Robinson is right to suggest that industrial capitalism, the emergence of the state, and the liberal theory of democracy all arose out of certain crisis experiences and thereby contributed to the specifically modern “matrix of political authority.”²⁷ But we can only begin to understand the persistence of the political in its unique *contemporary* forms by connecting the general claim that the state is the alienated product of the underlying discourse of political order with the more concrete developments that lent the discipline of political science its peculiar national features. Among these are the rise of American global power in the twentieth century and the corresponding practices of professional social scientific knowledge production enabled by this global shift.²⁸

What are the determining social forces in Robinson’s account of the emergence and reification of the political and of the specific place of the social sciences within the reproduction of capitalist society? He maintains that the dialectic between the political and its apolitical mirror images has its roots in the historical development of European societies from their feudal-agrarian-theocratic forms to capitalist-industrial-parliamentary ones, eventually resulting in the emergence of a “rationalized social order and organization” of modern market society.²⁹ As he writes, “the constructs of the market or economic society are one set of the material factors which service the political authority *episteme*,” to the extent that the onset of commercial society modified the form and content in which political authority appeared.³⁰

27. *Ibid.*, 45.

28. James Farr and Raymond Seidelman, eds., *Discipline and History: Political Science in the United States* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993); John G. Gunnell, *Imagining the American Polity: Political Science and the Discourse of Democracy* (State Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004); and Raymond Seidelman, *Disenchanted Realists: Political Science and the American Crisis* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016).

29. Robinson, *Terms of Order*, 2, 55.

30. *Ibid.*, 55.

At this point, Robinson had not yet fully developed the account of the origin of capitalism and its relationship to Western civilization and racial thinking made famous by his 1983 *Black Marxism and the Making of the Black Radical Tradition*.³¹ In this work, the processes of racialization and their relationship to the emergence of capitalism are relatively underemphasized. However, elements of Robinson's growing conviction about classical Marxism's Eurocentrism, statism, and teleology are already present.³² Marxism is said to suffer from a "'racist' sense of history," a "dim view of the capacities of peasant communities to achieve, autonomously, liberation," and belief in the necessity of a "rationalized political authority" in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat.³³

Robinson maintains that it is ultimately the market-state dyad that endows the political (in its modern form) with its ordering capacities. But given his skepticism of historical materialism's explanatory power, he places far less emphasis on the abstract domination of capital over social relations than he does on abstract domination by the state. On the one hand, this reminds us that political forms and their ideological representations are not merely derivative of the forces and relations of production (even as some of Robinson's contemporaries reached this same conclusion without rejecting historical materialism.) But this focus on the political and the state, even with the goal of their deconstruction, is also a double-edged sword. It reveals that Robinson's critique of the persistence of the political is ultimately grounded in the phenomenon of *consciousness*: "If a people found a consciousness of authority, survival, and order without respect to the political, that is, without human agencies which embody power and its cognates, then they can be understood to be authentically without politics."³⁴ Conversely, the theoretical and epistemic predispositions of Western social scientists reasoning from within the logic of the political and the state prevents them from seeing these phenomena

31. The secondary literature on Robinson and Marxism is rapidly growing. For a contemporary critique, see August H. Nimtz, Jr., "Marxism and the Black Struggle: The 'Class v. Race' Debate Revisited," *Journal of African Marxists* 7/8 (1985): 75–89. For a more recent critique, see Cedric Johnson, "The Wrong Durée: The Politics of Cedric J. Robinson's Racial Capitalism," *Nonsite.org*, (January 29, 2025), <https://nonsite.org/the-wrong-duree-the-politics-of-cedric-j-robinsons-racial-capitalism/>.

32. These critiques would be developed at greater length in *Black Marxism* and *The Anthropology of Marxism*.

33. Robinson, *Terms of Order*, 246, 249, 253. Robinson suggests that dialectical materialism, being a theory of capitalist society, is ill-equipped to produce a historical anthropology—that is, of pre-capitalist societies and peoples "outside" of (Eurocentric) History.

34. *Ibid.*, 28.

in their “ontological authority,” leading to a “compulsion to subordinate apolitical phenomena [i.e., leaderless, horizontal societies] to political coherence.”³⁵

Robinson suggests that the ideological constellations undergirding Western systems of thought aspire to the standpoint of a metaphysical totality, even if they are too internally contradictory to ever attain it.³⁶ Social theories like structural-functionalism, which (wrongly) presumed the homology of social structures across time and place and their gradual linear convergence, are challenged by Robinson on the grounds of historicism and social constructivism—that what dogmatic Western “objectivity” may identify as irrational in other cultures may in fact be the existence of “whole conscious structures with very different capacities and very different incapacities.”³⁷ But we are left asking whether these cultural and civilizational differences can be bridged. Are there certain boundaries and limits that, ultimately, render attempts at understanding and conceptualization across epistemic and cultural experiences only partially communicable at best, or projections of domination at worst? Ostensibly, there is a point at which comprehension runs up against the limits of the socially-constructed consciousness of a community: the practices of the Ila-Tonga are *intelligible* to the Western anthropologist, even if never fully *comprehensible*. The result is the projection of ready-made frameworks derived from the Western experience of political and social development: in the face of the kinship structures of the Tonga, “the conceptual and methodological paradigms of Western social science” increasingly become a projection of “the history and development of Western institutions.” “Western social thought,” Robinson concludes, “is not merely ethnocentric, but epistemocentric as well.”³⁸

When Robinson suggests, near the end of *The Terms of Order*, that “a society might be best understood as a mix of peoples, each possessing a distinct consciousness. That is to say that human history may be thought of as the ‘history’ of tribes and peoples,” we can make two observations.³⁹ First is the conspicuous absence of classes from this formulation, as the inversion of the Marxist position that class struggles are the prime movers of history. Second is that the historical causes of this “mix of peoples,” the *capitalist* processes of enslavement, colonization, and primitive accumulation that made them possible—as well as the new articulations of

35. *Ibid.*, 29.

36. “I have never conceded the notion that the West has ordered the world in a rational whole: no coherent order, no singular whole, has ever been forged under the authority of capital and the unifying language of world systems theory simply does not capture the chaos of capitalism.” Morse and Robinson, “Capitalism, Marxism, and the Black Radical Tradition,” 7.

37. Robinson, *Terms of Order*, 75.

38. *Ibid.*, 199.

39. *Ibid.*, 205.

collective consciousness that they birthed—seem to have left unchanged their shared consciousness.⁴⁰ This claim already contains the formative traces of what Asad Haider has called the “relativist philosophy of history,” as well as of the close relationship between (non-teleological and non-linear) history and the internal consistency of a community’s structures of thought, that would go on to inform *Black Marxism*.⁴¹

Like the rest of Robinson’s oeuvre, even where one disagrees, *The Terms of Order* poses questions that helps cast our thinking about the relationship between politics, ideology, and social science in a new light. Its value is as an example of a work written from the vantage point of a political and ideological crisis that existing social theories proved inadequate for explaining. Fifty years later, as the discipline once again finds itself confronting a series of accumulating crises, interrogating its own origins and embeddedness in these same structures of power that are now under strain is more necessary than ever.

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40. Robinson’s perspective may be usefully contrasted with two of his contemporaries, Stuart Hall and Etienne Balibar. A discussion of current debates surrounding racial capitalism is beyond the scope of this essay. However, more purchase can be gained from this concept if we understand it as a social phenomenon to be explained, rather than the causal mechanism which explains other phenomena (that is, as an explanandum, not an explanans). This would require concretizing specific instances of “racial capitalist” hegemonic projects and the means by which they articulate distinct forms of domination within a concrete social formation. See Stuart Hall, “Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance,” in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, ed. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 195–245; see also Etienne Balibar “Racism and Nationalism” and “The Nation Form: History and Ideology,” in Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London, UK: Verso, 2011), 37–68, 86–106. For a productive juxtaposition, see Marcel Paret and Zachary Levenson, “Two Racial Capitalisms: Marxism, Domination, and Resistance in Cedric Robinson and Stuart Hall,” *Antipode* (2024): <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.13054>.

41. Asad Haider, “The Shadow of the Plantation,” *Viewpoint Magazine* (February 13, 2017), <https://viewpointmag.com/2017/02/12/the-shadow-of-the-plantation/>.