Concepts of Cabralism: A review

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Introduction

Though Amilcar Cabral was an agricultural engineer, poet, and writer, he was best known as a revolutionary, even if Reiland Rabaka would prefer he were known as an “innovative and complex organic intellectual-activist” and a “transdisciplinary critical social theorist” (p. 14). As founder of the Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC) in 1956, Cabral lead the overthrow of the Portuguese occupation of Guinea-Bissau and the Cape Verde islands, where he went by his nom de guerre, Abel Djassi. Born in 1924, he was assassinated by Portuguese forces on January 20th, 1973, some eight months before Guineau-Bissau’s unilateral declaration of independence.

Like many 20th century revolutionaries who fought to overthrow colonial states, Cabral was profoundly influenced by Marxism in both theory and praxis. What remains remarkable about Cabral is his willingness to break with Marxist orthodoxy and experiment. Indeed, as Rabaka writes, “Cabral’s critical theory contests and combats not only global imperialism, but also European critical theory” (p. 153). Rather than relying upon Marxist accounts of history,
Cabral, like Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Leopold Senghor, called for a “return to the source” — a “critical return” that reinvented precolonial traditions of the past so as to proffer radical avenues for decolonization in the present, including new forms of identity, culture, and economics (p. 232). Going against the Marxism of his time, Cabral argued that the decolonization of the present lay in retrieving and reinventing pre-capitalist social assemblages of the past — and not in the standard Marxist class dialects of the proletariat and its promised deliverance of a worker’s paradise (p. 167). Likewise, Cabral considered culture an important aspect of “production” and as a “key component of anti-colonialism” (p. 158), and not just a superstructural effect of the economic base.

Cabral’s heterodoxy reveals an inventive and agile, yet critical and pragmatic approach. As an “involuntary theorist” whose work was forged in anticolonial struggle (p. 297), Cabral focused on specific and local needs while recognizing, at the same time, how they have been afflicted by the global forces of European “world imperialism”, racialized colonialism, and capitalist exploitation (pp. 154–6). Reiland Rabaka, who in Concepts of Cabralism undertakes a detailed, critical, and penetrating read of Cabral’s critical thought, emphasizes how many critics have “misread” Cabral, particularly by neglecting Cabral’s emphasis upon the global character of “racial oppression and capitalist exploitation” (p. 156). Thus, as readers of Cabral, we need to be attentive to how Cabral “self-reflexively concretizes, historicizes, and politicizes” (p. 226) — in short, and as Rabaka argues throughout, Cabral’s thought should not be collapsed to European critical theory or Marxism, just as it should not be reduced to an extension of Fanon’s theory of decolonization. Though noting the specificity of Cabral’s thought, one of Rabaka’s overarching theses in Concepts of Cabralism is to demonstrate the conceptual and historical lineage of what he calls “Africana critical theory.”

Rabaka argues that Cabral’s approach, like Africana critical theory itself, is eclectic not for the sake of “theoretical synthesis,” but because “its earned interest lies in radical and revolutionary democratic social(ist) transformation in the anti-imperialist interests of the wretched of the earth” (pp. 296–7). Indeed, one of Rabaka’s chief arguments for the specificity of what he calls Africana critical theory is to point out how Cabral’s thought, conducted on the grounds of an actual revolution, challenges the conceptual givens of Marxism precisely because the latter is “incarcerated . . . within the Eurocentric world” (p. 184). Cabral, for his part recognizing how theory in-itself is a strategic part of anticolonial struggle, named his approach “the weapon of theory” — a radical form of bricolage that draws from multiple sources, with first and foremost the concern of independence in mind (p. 292). His address of the same name, delivered at the first Tricontinental Conference of the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America in Havana in January 1966, point-blank questioned the Marxist primacy of class struggle as “the single and greatest determinant of world-wide historical development,” proffering instead a perspective that focuses upon the interrelationship of racialized colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism, and how this “inextricable” trio shapes “social classes in colonial and neocolonial societies” (Rabaka’s description, p. 191). Cabral’s “weapon of theory” is perhaps more important
now than ever, given that his unique perspective has helped shaped today’s intersectional approaches that articulate race, gender, sexuality, and disability to global systems of exploitation.

Reiland Rabaka’s impressive study wrestles with the critical concepts left to us by Cabral, a figure who has mostly gone understudied outside of his historical role. This is no easy task, as Cabral’s writing is delivered primarily in the context of speeches burdened with Marxist jargon, and despite its force, remains incomplete. Nonetheless, Rabaka does justice to Cabral’s complexity, with particular attention paid to Cabral’s strategic questioning — yet close relationship to — Marxism and European critical theory. Yet, Concepts of Cabralism does not commence with Cabral. For the first 87 pages of the text, Rabaka undertakes close readings of Césaire, Senghor, and Fanon, arguing for a theoretical lineage connecting the Harlem Renaissance to Negritude and Cabral. For a book focused on Cabral, as the title seems to indicate, the chapters read as if organized backwards, and readers may even profitably begin with the second half of the book. That said, Rabaka’s project of constructing a coherent lineage to Africana critical theory is exciting and welcome — particularly as a “transdisciplinary human science that rejects the rules of the epistemic apartheid of the European and European American ivory towers of academia” (p. 15).

In part one, Rabaka’s close readings reveal the complex dynamics of Negritude and its inheritances from the Harlem Renaissance, European Marxism, and critical theory, and he ably justifies the need for “guerilla intellectuals” to critique yet make use of “everything and anything they could get their hands on in their struggle(s) against racism, colonialism, and capitalism,” including radical European concepts from the heart of empire itself (p. 32). Indeed, Rabaka asserts throughout — and some might say, overstates — that “Marxism negates the concrete realities of the interconnections and intersections of racism and colonialism with capitalism” (p. 185). At the same time, Rabaka explains that Marxism was nonetheless attractive to Cabral and other Africana theorists of Negritude precisely for its “theory of revolution that promoted immediate action” (p. 185).

Turning to Césaire, Rabaka provides a mostly appraising overview, focusing upon his coining of Negritude as a “‘decolonization of consciousness’ . . . grounded in black radical politics and a distinct Pan-African perspective” (p. 49), and on the concept of a “return” that values the “cultural inheritance of persons of African descent” (p. 37). Indeed, Césaire’s concept of a “critical return to Africa’s precolonial past” (p. 56), as a tool of decolonization, would prove influential for Fanon, Senghor, and Cabral. Before committing to the concept, however, Rabaka turns to Senghor, and demonstrates how such a “return” can go awry, insofar as it risks becoming “assimilationist Negritude” (p. 62). Rabaka critiques Senghor, who was President of Senegal from 1960 to 1980, and a philosopher of Negritude in his own right, for attempting to synthesize, or rather “complement,” European and African cultural values through “cultural borrowing,” which Rabaka attacks for its ahistoricity, particularly its inattentiveness to the reality of the colonized world (p. 39). Though recognizing Senghor’s contributions to thinking African ontological specificity — a point echoed in Cabral and Rabaka’s turn to a “new humanity” (p. 233), which I shall address below — Rabaka summarizes Senghor as “Pan-African folk
philosophy” that paints a “purposely ‘primitive’ picture of African culture” (p. 63). Rabaka’s critique is well executed, and it is startling to see how Senghor’s texts, written in Sartrean existentialist style, appear not only reductive but clichéd, as if mirroring the very Western racist stereotype of the noble savage. Seemingly without self-reflexivity, Senghor condenses the multiplicity of African lived experience into “an intense ontological affinity with nature” that is supposed to “complement” white European “rationality” (p. 66). It is here that Rabaka undertakes some interesting work around consciousness and ideology, suggesting that Senghor’s work betrays a “colonized consciousness, a false consciousness that is predicated on and privileges Eurocentric views” (p. 69). In the end, as Rabaka points out, Senghor echoes Sartre’s infamous negation of Negritude as but a negative moment in the dialectical movement towards “Universal Culture” (p. 73) — a rather condescending and Eurocentric position that so enraged Fanon in Black Skins, White Masks.

But Senghor shifts positions over time, and as he breaks from Sartre (p. 73), a more nuanced account emerges. Though Senghor’s thought, like Fanon’s, begins in the Parisian cafés of French existentialism and Marxism, he shifts to an increasingly decolonial and Africanist Negritude, and Rabaka summarizes how Senghor, by the 1960s, begins advocating for an inventive return to Africanist values that takes as its centerpiece, “African socialism” (p. 74). It is here that Rabaka begins connecting Negritude to what he calls “Cabralism,” even though the book has yet to engage deeply with Cabral’s work (p. 77). What is important about Cabralism here, I think, is its emphasis upon the radical pedagogy and strategic force of what Césaire called the “practice of teaching the people a remembrance of their sovereignty” (p. 57). This “critical return” or “return to the source” is developed throughout Concepts of Cabralism, and is perhaps its most important theoretical weapon. Rabaka, who prefers “rediscover” over “retrieval,” describes the return as a process in which the people “critically encounter and dialectically engage their inherited historicity” (p. 57).1 Yet the idea itself is not new. The Ghanaian concept of sankofa, briefly mentioned on page 244, describes “the benevolent use of knowledge from the past to positively alter the present and ensure the future.” The indigenous concept of sankofa suggests that the very concept of the “return to the source” is, in its own way, an iteration of this precolonial concept. It is thus somewhat surprising that Rabaka takes 244 pages to mention it, and then only to inscribe sankofa under the Western concept (if not telos) of “making positive progress” (p. 244). Sankofa also has particular resonance today, particularly in the black science fiction and speculative arts, such as Afrofuturism, that mine the past to imagine alternative futures. For example, Kodwo Eshun (2000) elaborates upon the concept of sankofa under the name of chronopolitics, which names the political activity by which the imaginative reinvention of the past infiltrates new futures into the present. Though these contemporary affiliations are left undeveloped, Rabaka leaves us ample resources to draw interesting connections between

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1 Of note, what Rabaka means by “dialectics” is finally defined on page 291 as “the art of demonstrating the interconnectedness of parts to each other and to the overarching system or framework as a whole.”
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sankofa, Africana critical theory, and contemporary Afrodiasporic cultures that put the concept into use, such as Afrofuturism.

The forced march of progress

In Cabral — and here I will move ahead to part two of the book — sankofa is conceptualized as a "return to the source" that retrieves the precolonial past for the present, not in a romantic fashion but with a "critical" attentiveness (p. 232). Rabaka describes Cabral’s concept (italics his) as “the dialectical process of revolutionary decolonization and revolutionary re-Africanization” (p. 231) that leads to, in Cabral’s words, “a veritable forced march along the road to cultural progress” (p. 232). It is worth remembering that Cabral’s militant rhetoric of the forced march echoes Fanon’s support of self-defensive revolutionary violence (pp. 139, 231). Yet, certain questions arise whenever progress is force-marched, just as one would most certainly ask if “progress” has been forced into a concept of the “return” that, given its recursive temporality, would seem to eschew a simplistic endgame or teleology of progress. The same goes for “the source,” though Rabaka emphasizes that there is no retrieval of some pure origin, but always a critical reappraisal and reinvention. Thus, there are limits, in both Rabaka and Cabral, to the conceptual challenges brought by the return, and these occur around the very points that Rabaka identifies as unique theoretical contributions in Cabral: individuation (revolutionary humanism), collectivity (unified nationalism), and their enunciation (the drama of history).

From the start, Cabral’s focus on a unified revolutionary nationalism is at least strategically at odds with Césaire and Fanon’s Pan-Africanism. Rabaka emphasizes Cabral’s strategic use of “revolutionary nationalism” — and not “tribalism” or other non-statist, nomadic formations — as “one of the bridges . . . from colonialism to decolonial democratic socialism” (p. 210). Thus, at least for Cabral, decolonization first requires collective unification under the nation-state, even if the territory itself remains a geographical act of colonial violence, especially for the many torn apart by its arbitrary borders. Cabral’s focus on nationalism is thus particularly fraught for other decolonial struggles, where decolonization demands the redefining of territorial boundaries and the calling into question of the very form of the nation-state as well as the need to belong to it.

Just as the nation-state is accepted as a frame of reference in Cabral, so is humanism, which is seen by Rabaka as integral to Africana critical theory itself (p. 139). Although Rabaka’s project of Africana critical theory is an “anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-capitalist, and sexual orientation-sensitive critical theory of contemporary society,” it is not, however, posthumanist (p. 266). Also, its metaphorical blind spot is its theoretical blind spot, insofar as it labels “blind spots and lens limitations . . . theoretical myopia” (p. 287), which suggests an insensitivity to theoretical languages that unwittingly metaphorise disability as a conceptual insufficiency.

This said, Cabral’s humanism is not without redefinition and deconstruction of the “human.” Rabaka writes that any return to the source, as a strategy of decolonization, “redefines
‘Africanity’, or ‘blackness’, if you will” (p. 233). This redefinition, I gather, is meant to reflect how the negative image of blackness imposed upon the colonized is discarded — such as the identity of the “primitive” or the “noble savage” — so that a liberated and decolonized blackness can emerge. Rabaka echoes Fanon’s claim that “Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men . . . of a new humanity,” by which the “thing” that has been colonized, in Rabaka’s words, “becomes human, becomes African” by providing revolutionary answers to the question(s) of liberation and the question(s) of identity” (p. 233). Thus decolonization is not only a socioeconomic struggle, but a (collective) project of self that remakes identity. For Rabaka, following Fanon, this revolutionary becoming is writ in the “progress” of “revolutionary humanism which is at the heart of the Africana tradition of critical theory” (p. 139). Thus the question of black revolutionary posthumanism, as in Afrofuturism or otherwise, is here left aside.

There are, nonetheless, interesting points in Rabaka’s text where he makes a claim for a kind of radical ontological difference that takes place during, and as an effect of, decolonization. Rabaka discusses Cabral’s belief that “post-imperialist Africa could inaugurate not only a new African, but a qualitatively new human being fundamentally opposed to and deeply concerned about any form of imperialism, in Africa or elsewhere” (p. 246). Before the “qualitatively new human” can be thought, however, the “human” is bound-up with the terrestrial and territorial concept of the nation: “a new type of human being and nation-state whose powers are totally mobilized for the ongoing struggle against new forms of colonialism and imperialism” (p. 219). Thus, questions remain. Neither Cabral nor Rabaka seem to consider how similar values of “progress,” wrapped in the nation-state and its “new man” — from Kipling’s “white man’s burden” to Nietzsche’s übermensch — were likewise behind various forms of European colonialism and white supremacy. Such uses are dialectically opposed, of course, to Africana critical theory’s anti-imperialism, but for any theorist of dialectics, any apparent opposite is just as suspect precisely because of its sublimation. Like the concept of the nation-state, the fundamental premise — humanism in general — remains unchallenged. Thus while these sketches of ontological difference remain tantalizing in Rabaka’s work, they remain underdeveloped, even as they suggest fruitful avenues for an Africana critical theory that would take into account diasporic, post-nationalist, and posthumanist black becomings.

One or more stages?

More crucial is the question of the value of these Western concepts at all, given Rabaka’s critique, throughout, of “European intellectual insularity and Eurocentric epistemic exclusiveness” that has been universalized and normalized as a result of Europe’s international imperialism” (p. 264). Given that Rabaka critiques “almost all modern and postmodern intellectual activity” as tainted by “Eurocentric paradigms” (p. 264), one wonders why concepts of progress, humanism, nationalism, and the nation-state remain unchallenged. Is weaponizing Eurocentric concepts for decolonization enough to disabuse them of their imperialist inheritance? If the entwined concepts of humanism, progress, and nationalism remain neutralized concepts in
Rabaka’s reading of Cabral — and thus not granted much critical attention — likewise is the concept of history.

For example, Cabral writes in 1970 that, “National liberation is the inalienable right of every people to have its own history” (p. 157). Rabaka understands Cabral as saying that, “it is only when colonized people regain control of their mode of production through national liberation that they can truly transcend the ‘sad position of being peoples without history’” (p. 157). Here, meaningful historical existence is directly yoked to nationalism. Granted, Cabral appears to be speaking to the strategic need of wrestling control of industry and culture — both of which are part of Cabral’s concept of production — from both colonial and neocolonial class control. At the same time, he is arguing that a liberated people are not liberated until they are free to write their own history — in the sense of inscribing their own past, but also in making decisions for their own future. Having control over history is not only to be free of colonialism in the history books, but also in structures of governance, and over the modes of production. But questions remain. First, why should the borders of the colonial nation-state remain even as the strategic limits of struggle, especially when its arbitrary borders have divided once united or nomadic peoples and disrupted precolonial flows of culture and exchange? What allies are lost, and enemies gained, in advocating for nationalism? Second, why does Cabral argue that colonized peoples have no history?

What is perhaps needed here is a nuanced appreciation of Cabral’s mode of address. That Cabral was writing to rouse his compatriots to revolutionary struggle explains his rhetorical emphasis. Of course therein lies realpolitik. Cabral undoubtedly constrained the boundaries of revolution to the nation-state to make it less of a threat to his neighbours as well as to the (Western) international community. But Rabaka understands Cabral as making an ontological — and not merely strategic — claim. Earlier, Rabaka considers what blocks the becoming of “the dominated people’s human agency,” writing that it is “imperialism, in the form of racial colonialism” that “intentionally blocks their capacity, ontologically speaking, to become and make themselves known, to each other and to other human groups, on their own terms and in their own culturally distinct way” (p. 230). Rabaka’s claim places an incredible emphasis upon imperialism to determine, if not overdetermine, the very history and process of ontology.

Indeed, to argue that colonized peoples have no history, or to accept without question that the colonized need to “[reclaim] their place on the stage (and often at the center) of human history” (p. 154), as Rabaka writes elsewhere, seems to suggest that there is only but one stage of history, and that there is no history otherwise, history inscribed in secret, in the samizdat of the very rebellion that would overthrow colonialism. Rabaka’s position seems to neglect the collective yet personal histories of struggle and culture, political resistance and poetry, love and music, “under” colonialism. For Rabaka, who develops this position before introducing Cabral, colonialism excludes or erases the colonized entirely from history. They are “barred . . . from the annals of history” (p. 139). This barring, however, is not just from the history books of the colonizer, or from inscribing the public history of the colonized, but from meaningful existence itself. Thus Rabaka writes that, “the racially colonized seek nothing less than to reclaim her or
his place on the stage of the miraculous drama of human existence and experience” (p. 139). The colonized are but nonexistence without experience, erased from world history, blocked by imperialism from becoming.

Given the focus in decolonization studies and activism on recovering and retrieving but also imaginatively reinventing the erased histories of enslaved and colonized peoples — and is this not also the very point of a “return to the source”? — Rabaka’s position, insofar as it develops Cabral’s strategic enunciation into a concrete philosophy that “seeks to inspire and engage actually existing individuals in the emancipatory efforts of their time and circumstances” (p. 159), seems to deny the very meaningful existence and emancipatory history of the people themselves. Philosophically, Rabaka seems to take a priori Hegel’s very schema of a singular world history, one in which Africa, as Hegel infamously wrote, “has no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit” (Philosophy of History, p. 99). Or to put it another way, Rabaka seems to overestimate the power of Eurocentric imperialism to erase and exclude its others. This is how white supremacy would indeed want it — that there is nothing of value to be recovered or remembered from the colonized, to the point where those struggling to “become human” are indeed but colonized “things”, not just as an intersectional position under white supremacy, but in an ontological void of absolute erasure from the singular stage of history.

Perhaps I overstate my case. But at the very least it introduces a problem, indeed the very kind of chicken-and-egg problem, of change and becoming, or as Rabaka would have it, of “progress”: how do those without history “return to the source” and “become human” if they don’t have a history of the return, those myths of the source, those arts and music of the society to-come? (And this leads to the very problem of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic, of becoming but like the master if the history of ontological alternatives has been absolutely erased.) One might also ask if the history of the people ceases with colonialism, as if a gap is to be traversed in the “return to the source” that would exclude all that was lived under colonialism. Is not the point to distinguish between the position of a thingified person and the ontology of a people’s collective memory that harbours the very prima materia of revolution? In any case, such a position can certainly be distinguished from others, including the hybridity of the colonial subject (Bhabha), their masking (Fanon), and their double consciousness (Du Bois) — all of which suggests that meaningful existence certainly persists under systems of oppression, and that alternative histories continue to be writ, awaiting their eventual liberation.

On this point, one has to ask if Rabaka’s argument, and Africana critical theory in general, would be better served by a concept of historical multiplicity and radical ontogenesis, precisely because such a perspective acknowledges that histories continue — personal, private, public — under systems of oppression, and that the very plurality of radical becomings and their histories supply the very “engine” for revolutionary decolonization itself.

Ironically, it is Cabral who seems to suggest that the history of the colonized is worthy in and of itself. Rabaka describes how Cabral challenges “the conventional Marxist and Frankfurt School critical theoretical contention that class struggle in capitalist states, as well as the conflict
between the capitalist and socialist countries, was the most important operative history-making force in the modern epoch,” arguing instead that the “anti-colonial national liberation movements were the major political forces in contemporary history and culture” (p. 169).

Yet, neither Rabaka nor Cabral seem to address why it matters to identify a singular engine to political or world history, in this case anticolonial struggle as the “foremost historical force” (p. 169) — rather than, say, recognizing the multiplicity of struggles taking place in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world in which a plurality of forces, from capitalism to climate and technology, unevenly infiltrate, invent, and contest multiple histories. Nevertheless, what Rabaka’s reading of Cabral seems to suggest is that, far from being existentially erased from history, the radical struggles of the colonized to achieve decolonization — which everywhere begins as soon as colonization and occupation begins — are an incredibly powerful force on the world’s stages.

The weapon of Cabralism

The questions of humanism, nationalism, history and class, central though they are, are but a few of the points covered in Rabaka’s fascinating study of Cabral — a text that is, on the whole, unrestrained in scope and fearless in its critique. Concepts of Cabralism is as uncompromising as it is convincing in its mission to establish the significance, and theoretical specificity, of Africana critical theory, as well as Cabral’s contributions to it. Rabaka’s thesis of a distinct mode of Africana critical theory that “weaponises” what it needs from European approaches without being beholden to them — and that reinvents and rediscovers alternative concepts by critically drawing from Africanist precolonial tradition — is an important, powerful, and necessary contribution to the “intellectual arsenal” (p. 14) of decolonial thought. Rabaka seeks to overturn the academic dominance of European thought, while at the same time, weaponizing it for decolonization. Concepts of Cabralism has many virtues as a weapon of theory. But it also has a few practical issues that keep it from being weaponized to its full extent.

Overall, the book suffers from a lack of editorial guidance. Many quotes from the same authors (Kellner, Marx, Fanon) are repeated verbatim. Some of the exegesis from citation is repetitive. There are long and undigestible lists of “–isms” and author citations. There are entire paragraphs in italics.

The book is also a challenge to read, not only because of its density, but because of its organization. Rather than beginning with Cabral, it begins with a long analysis of Negritude and concludes with what feels like an introduction. Rabaka does not mention Cabral’s assassination until page 260. Although Cabral “did not present his critical theory in any discursive or systematic manner” (p. 151), surely Rabaka’s task is to present one. More could have been done to contextualize Cabral’s theory to the history of his life and that of the revolutionary struggle. Rabaka states that, “conceptual engagements should not be undertaken without due attention” to “life-histories and personal journeys” — yet there are few “insurgent intellectual and radical political biographies” in the text (p. 297). We also need to know if what Cabral said was
effective. How was Cabral received, and how effective were his theories once translated into revolutionary action? How was his work interpreted, by friend and foe? Indeed, how did Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde fair under Cabral? What happened after his assassination? For these reasons, Concepts of Cabralism does not serve as neophyte’s introduction to Cabral, even if it is an impressive and complex work of Africana critical theory.

Lastly, Rabaka’s rhetoric can lead him to overstate his claims. This too can undermine the text as a work of theory. For example, Rabaka critiques Fred Rush for speaking of “critical theory as a whole” (p. 281) in a Eurocentric manner, particularly for Rush’s statement that, “What is needed is a treatment of critical theory as a whole that respects its richness without losing its conceptual main points” (Rush, in Rabaka, p. 281). As elsewhere, Rabaka is jarring and grandstanding in his critique, writing that “Has it ever dawned on [Rush] that those of us that are neither white nor male [Rabaka is male] might find his contentions . . . rather exclusive and therefore offensive, if not ultimately revealing a subtle racial and gender subtext that seems to seep through Frankfurt School ‘critical theory as a whole’ — from Horkheimer and Adorno through to Habermas and Honneth?” (281). Yet — and yet — two pages later Rabaka seems to concede to Rush’s very position, writing: “As much as the Africana tradition of critical theory may discursively differ from other traditions of critical theory, in some senses it unambiguously shares the same methodological orientation and approach with other traditions of critical theory” (281). Rabaka then numbers and explains these shared “conceptual main points,” and does so using Rush’s terms.

Rabaka’s argument would be stronger if he had addressed the role of critical caricature or strategic stereotypy in his own text. At the same time, recognizing stereotypy as a strategy of decolonization (as in, for example, Rey Chow’s work in The Protestant Ethnic) would have made Rabaka’s greater point — that there is a radical specificity to Africana critical theory — all the stronger as well.

The question of polemic is of course tied to audience. Rabaka writes that his work might provoke “shock and awe [in] many of my more conservative and (neo)liberal-leaning readers” (p. 263). But it is difficult to imagine that such readers are the audience for this book. If anything, for many readers looking to Cabral’s contributions to decolonization, Rabaka might be seen as not radical enough. Though it is always important to critique Eurocentrism, it is just as important to coordinate the shared arguments and observations concerning capitalism, racialized colonialism, and imperialism. To his credit, Rabaka undertakes an ongoing conversation with Horkheimer that is welcome in this respect — and that I cannot overview here — particularly because, despite Rabaka’s attacks on European critical theory, “Africana philosophy and Africana critical theory are not . . . exclusively affairs of persons of African origin and descent, but affairs of insurgent intellectual-activists who are concerned about and interested in eradicating human suffering and social misery” (fn. 9, p. 180). Perhaps in a future book more of what has been outlined here will be filled in with historical but also inventive content. For example, for all of the discussion of a “return to the source” in Concepts of Cabralism, there are few, if any, examples of what this might look like. Nor is there an overview as to whether such
returns were taken up historically, and what those looked like. What was retrieved and reinvented? Did it work?

A more concise and “weaponized” overview of Cabral could have resulted from Rabaka’s scholarship, but this is not that book. Rather, Concepts of Cabralism is an erudite and powerful exegesis of the conceptual weapons that inhabit Cabral’s work, coupled with a critical overview of Negritude that elucidates the premises of Africana critical theory in general. It ably makes the case for Cabral’s ongoing significance to decolonial strategies and thought. Thus I look forward to Rabaka’s forthcoming volume of Cabral’s writings and speeches, also to be published by Lexington Books.

References

