

## Harry Chang: A Seminal Theorist of Racial Justice

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*In the 1990s and early 2000s there was a significant influx of young Korean American activists. I decided to write a short piece to let them know that they had an important forebear. However, the piece soon morphed into an essay about Harry's unrecognized but critical theoretical contributions to the analysis of racism and racial justice.*

It is little known that a shy Korean immigrant named Harry Chang made vital contributions to the theory and practice of racial justice in the United States. In his most fruitful period, the 1970s, his work shaped the thinking and political work of numerous movement organizations, mostly led by people of color. Although he died prematurely in 1979, his work helped lay the foundations of two of the most progressive and influential theories of racism: the theory of racial formation and critical race theory.

To one degree or another, Harry may be credited with a number of ideas that were highly controversial in the 1970s but which in recent years have become much more accepted. His starting point was to highlight the centrality of the “one drop” rule that determines race in the United States (only). By analyzing this rule, he showed that racial categories are socio-historical categories, not genetic or genealogical, and that they are qualitatively distinct from class, ethnicity, or nation/nationality categories. Harry coined the term *racial formation* to underscore the necessity of analyzing racism as a historical process that encompasses the origins of racism, how and why it has changed over time, and the process of eliminating it in a given historical context. He also argued for the centrality of law to racial formation and the inseparability and mutual determination of racial and class formation. Clarifying the distinctiveness of racism also laid the basis for analyzing the intersection of race and nationality.

Unfortunately, Harry has received little or no public recognition for his important contributions. The analytic method he used to arrive at these conclusions reveals a virtuoso dialectician at work.

When we worked together in the 1970s, Harry often reminded me of Karl Marx's despairing thought that the *German Ideology* (later labeled “the first truly Marxist work”) had been consigned to “the gnawing criticism of the mice” in his attic. Harry would muse how, in a similar vein, perhaps one day, long after his death, someone might stumble across his manuscripts and say, “Wow, that obscure Korean guy really knew something.”

## INFLUENCE OF OLIVER COX

Born Chang Heh-Ik in 1937 to Protestant seminarian educators in South Korea, Harry immigrated to the United States to attend UCLA in 1955, the year of the great Montgomery Bus Boycott. Somehow over the next decade this fledgling foreign student, like many others in the United States and worldwide during that fateful period, got radicalized. He was introduced to Marxist circles by fellow foreign students at UCLA, married the daughter of a prominent Black Communist in 1964, and began to organize Marxist study circles with students from the third world as a graduate student in Seattle in the late 1960s.

Although he was trained as a mathematician, Harry became a brilliant Marxist educator and a truly original applied philosopher. His focus and forte was dialectics: he dedicated himself to learning, teaching, and most of all applying the Marxist analytical method. He disciplined his mind by constantly writing, not for publication, but to clarify and challenge his own understanding.

A true product of the 1960s, Harry became absolutely obsessed with the uniqueness and importance of race and racism in the United States. He dedicated much of his life's energy to unraveling the political and historical mysteries of this most devastating U.S. institution. Unlike many other theorists, he planted himself among young political activists, mostly of color, and not within the walls of academe.

I first met Harry at a Venceremos Brigade meeting in Oakland at the very end of 1970 and he already had the bug. In that meeting he took on the project of writing a pamphlet on U.S. racism to be used in preparing people for the Cuba experience. I was a youthfully arrogant nineteen-year-old who felt he knew a lot about the subject without ever having studied it. So I volunteered to work with Harry, largely, I thought, to make sure this unknown Korean immigrant who had just moved to the Bay Area from Seattle didn't screw it up.

At the time, Harry's thinking about racism was mainly influenced by Oliver Cox's magisterial *Caste, Class and Race*. My ignorance was such that I had never heard of this great Black Marxist or his magnificent book, but Harry had thoroughly digested it. He rapidly penned "Notes on Racism," which attempted to incorporate and to some degree advance upon Cox's insights into the uniqueness of race as compared to other similar categories (caste and class) and what Cox saw as the integral historical connection of racism and capitalism.

Over the next eight years of intensive theoretical work on racism, Cox's influences remained in Harry's laser-like focus on those two questions.

## MARX'S METHOD AND RACISM

At the same time, Harry's new insights on these subjects were linked to his study of Karl Marx's philosophy, especially his dialectical method of analysis, as most fully

exhibited in *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*. He became convinced of the profundity of Lenin's remark that Marx in general and *Capital* in particular could not be deeply understood without a serious study of the German philosopher Hegel, especially Hegel's *Science of Logic*.

From 1971 until his premature death in 1979 Harry avidly studied, wrote about, and led dozens of study groups on *Capital*, involving hundreds of young political activists. Thirty years later, his hundreds of pages of carefully prepared study notes on *Capital* are still astonishing for their insights into Marx's method. For me and many others, studying with Harry opened up new intellectual vistas and introduced a standard of theoretical and logical rigor that most of us had never imagined. He gave substantive meaning to "dialectical analysis," a phrase that had so often been used to obfuscate and dazzle rather than for concrete analysis.

But Harry's study of Marx was, above all, dedicated to enhancing his ability to unravel the intricacies of U.S. racism. At the time, most U.S. leftists either saw racism primarily as an ideology used by capitalists to justify "superexploiting" Black workers (racism as intensified class exploitation) or as the ideology of national oppression (Blacks as an oppressed nation in the Black Belt South or an internal colony).

Harry believed these views were metaphoric rather than analytical, and, as he delved further into *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*, he became convinced that Marx's method could also be applied to understanding racism:

"More than half of *Capital* is devoted to the critique of bourgeois political economic categories [commodity, value, money, capital, etc.]. It is a key insight of historical materialism that historical development is reflected in the logical development [the development of concepts and categories] and, as Engels put it, the latter, as a result, represent the former "in complete maturity and classical form." Hence the critique of capitalist categories plays a crucial role in the analysis of the capitalist mode of production. This is also the method that must be applied to the race question.... A Marxist analysis of racism must begin with a critique of the racial categories (black and white) themselves, and from there proceed to an examination of the socio-historical situation that endowed these forms of thought with deadly social validity." ("Racism and Racial Categories," 1973)

## CRITIQUE OF RACIAL CATEGORIES

Put another way, Harry's first methodological insight was: "'Racism' should only be the subject not the object of study." The object of study should be racial categories and the social practice that produced them. By this method, Harry sought to overcome what he saw as rampant subjectivity in race theorizing, especially the transposition of the race question into an internal colonial, national, or ethnic question.

If we ask a million people what racism is we would probably get a million different answers, since “racism” refers to individual opinions formed in the course of living in race relations. But if we ask a million people to identify each other as “black” or “white” the chances are the results would be practically uniform. The race of a person is not subject to individual-subjective interpretation, is not a matter of opinion. The racial distinction is a categorical necessity without which racism cannot fully function while the concept of racism is not. (Untitled manuscript, 1975)

It was, he decided, in the dialectical materialist critique of these racial categories that the particularity of the social relations of racism (compared to class, caste, nation, nationality, or ethnicity) could be accurately identified. If that task were not undertaken, he argued, “racial categories are posited as eternal metaphysical entities existing prior to race relations and valid beyond the realm of racism,” a notion he thought as wrongheaded as seeing capital as an eternal reality valid beyond the realm of capitalism. Such a view would lead, he thought, to the uncritical notion that the goal of antiracist struggle is racial (or “national”) equality rather than the elimination of oppression based on racial categories, just as reformist or utopian theories of capitalism called for equality between classes.

Harry’s experience as an immigrant, his study of Cuba, and his analysis of racial categories highlighted the peculiarity of the dialectic of U.S. racial categories: the so-called hypodescent rule by which anyone who appeared to have a single drop of “Black blood” was considered Black. He commented on how U.S. racism often viciously divided immigrant siblings from Latin America and the Caribbean into Black and white. Such anti-human racial categories, Harry recognized, are peculiar to the United States alone.

In fact, he argued, these categories themselves harbor a chauvinistic logic: “Inherent in the notion of ‘White’ is the requirement of genetic ‘purity’ while the notion of ‘Black’ harbors the assumption of genetic ‘contamination.’ One of the peculiarities of the racist psyche in the U.S. is that its sense of a ‘drop of African blood’ is unbelievably acute but it is practically blind to ‘a drop of European blood.’” “White” and “Black” are not the least bit neutral; they contained the chauvinistic logic of pure versus contaminated, clean versus dirty, and pure breed versus mongrel. Racial categories, in other words, are not determined by natural science or genealogy, and were certainly not an attempt at neutral physical description. “Racial categories are not biological categories, but social-relational categories that fetishize genetic diversity.” The logic of racial categories is itself racist.

Moreover, he noted, “the dialectic of the categories of Black and White is relative as opposed to absolute”—meaning that, like class categories (workers versus capitalists, landlords versus peasants, etc.), they are determined by and only in relation to each other. “White” and “Black” are not eternal, independent, or neutral categories: they are the necessary ideological representation of the mutually dependent, mutually exclusive poles created by the social relationship of racism. But unlike class categories, they hinge not on economic relationships but on a socially

produced fetishization of physiognomy, a fetishization fashioned to maximize those who could be defined as permanently enslavable. (U.S. slavery was the only modern slave society that depended primarily on slave reproduction rather than the African slave trade for the bulk of its labor force.)

This is in sharp contrast to the dialectics of ethnic, religious, and national categories, which are absolute categories—meaning they indicate the historical practice of self-determined, inner-sourced relationships. Nations, for instance, are formed through the inner development of national life, and they enter into international relations. A colonized nation strives for independence (self-determination), not the destruction of the colonial power. Thus, Harry's analysis starkly distinguished the dialectics of race from class (economically determined), ethnicity, or nationality (socio-culturally determined irrespective of physical difference, hence the possibility of multiracial ethnic groups or nationalities).

Harry's analysis of racial categories drew direct inspiration from Marx. Bourgeois social science sees "working class" and "capitalist class" as neutral descriptions of one's economic activity or income level. Marx exploded that illusion by showing that in reality they are the opposite but interconnected poles of the social relationship of class exploitation whose negation necessitated the overthrow of capital and, ultimately, the abolition of class society. Similarly, while bourgeois social science accepts racial categories as natural, genealogical, ethnic, or descriptive, Harry saw racial groups as interconnected poles of white supremacy/Black oppression whose negation necessitates not only a fight against inequality but also the end of a society polarized into racial groups.

Harry was fond of saying that racism was a form of commodity fetishism: the bourgeois habit of thought that confounds socioeconomic relationships as inherent in the natural state of things (e.g., products versus commodities, gold versus money, genetic or genealogical diversity versus racial groups).

And just as money was not just a clever invention but a distinctive social relationship which had developed instead through historical phases of individual (occasional barter) to particular (regular but not yet dominant exchange relations) to general (where the practice of exchange and commodity production were so generalized as to require the development of money to facilitate it), so racism did not pop into the world full-fledged (or once generalized, did not stay the same), but was the product of what he called racial formation.

## RACISMS AND RACIAL FORMATION

Given the context of working with the Venceremos Brigade and trying to understand Cuban race relations, Harry was quick to notice the stunning difference between racial categories in the United States and Cuba. In Cuba the categories are numerous, descriptive, and fluid rather than bipolar, hardened, and chauvinistic as in the United States.

So, where Cox and others had seen racism as essentially an international phenomenon, Harry's connection to Cuba (and his study of South Africa) helped him clearly see that racial categories (and therefore racisms) are qualitatively different in different countries, and may change in different historical periods within a given country. Racial categories are not, in other words, universal or global categories like capital or money. By focusing on the development of racial categories, Harry insisted on the ability to "differentiate between racism proper (e.g., the U.S.) from quasi-racial or racism-like situations (as in most of Latin America) where racial discrimination exists but not as a fully independent and systematic social relation."

He felt this distinction was as important as that between barter and money. It also enabled him to distinguish between different fully developed systems of racism: the racism based on bipolar racial categories in the United States versus the racism based on the tripolar racial categories (Black, colored, and white) of South Africa. And it was the basis of coming to grips with the transformation of nationality or ethnic categories (e.g., different specific European, African, Latino, or Asian ethnicities) into racial (Black and white) or combined national-racial categories (Asian, Chicano, Latino).

Drawing from the Marxist concept of class formation, Harry dubbed the concrete development of racism as "racial formation," a concept that encompassed its origins, development/transformations, and demise.

Finally, just as Marx had grasped that the formation of money was linked to commodity production, Harry realized that racial formation in the United States was linked to the peculiar historical conditions of the development of capitalism. He guided a collective study of the historical origins of racism in the colonial United States that established a relationship between the development of racial categories with the development of the slavery-based plantation system. And he showed that racism was not a mere "add on" to U.S. capitalism, but a central condition without which U.S. capitalist development would have been qualitatively different. In other words, racism could powerfully shape capitalism, not just vice versa. Racism did not just add additional profits to capital, it actually determined the very shape and course of capitalist accumulation, social formation, and political structure in the United States. Herein, for example, lies a key to why the United States was different from, say, Brazil, (which had slavery but was underdeveloped) or Canada (which had no slavery but is a second rank capitalist power).

## THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SLAVERY

Harry's analysis of the political economy of slavery displayed his theoretical creativity. Some Marxists deduced that slavery in the United States was capitalist simply because it existed in a capitalist world-system. Others asserted that it was precapitalist because the "internal contradiction" of slavery was not a wage

relationship. In “The Slave Economy in U.S. Capitalism” (1974), Harry argued, “the character of the historical essence of slavery in the U.S. hinges on the analytic decision as to whether a slave mode of production has ‘capitalist features’ or a capitalist mode of production that made use of slave-labor.”

Harry showed that the “planter” or “slaveholder” was not a single economic role, but in fact involved in a variety of economic relationships: landowner (or tenant), slave owner, slave user (or renter), slave buyer/seller, banker (or debtor), merchant, etc. Most important, “the distinction between slave-owning and slave-using corresponds to a case of *capitalistic* dialectic of distribution and production.”

The actual historical circumstance of the origin of slavery in North America leads us to conclude that slave-labor arose as a *substitute* for wage-labor in a mode of production demanding wage-labor but faced with the shortage of wage-laborers. In its modus operandi, the category of “price of slaves” was as well established as “price of land” in capitalism; hence Marx’s remark that “the price paid for a slave is nothing but the anticipated and capitalized surplus-value or profit to be rung out of slave” (*Capital*, vol. 3, [International Publishers] 807) is fully applicable here.... Thus, although slaves in the U.S. were not wage-earners, they were the labor counterpart of capital with this proviso: the planter expended wage in his capacity of agricultural capitalist and intercepted wage in his capacity of capitalist slaveowner. (“The Slave Economy in U.S. Capitalism,” 1974)

## THE WORK OF HARRY AND HIS SUCCESSORS

Over a tremendously productive period from 1973 to 1978, Harry penned a number of essays in which he set forth his theoretical and historical research. In that period, Harry wrote “Racism and Racial Categories,” “National Minorities and Racial Minorities,” “Racial Categories and Racial Formation,” “The Slave Economy in the U.S.,” “Critique of the Black Nation Thesis,” several manuscripts tentatively titled “Towards a Marxist Theory of Racism,” “Black Capitalism,” and several untitled manuscripts.

In his lifetime, he only published one of these essays, *Critique of the Black Nation Thesis*, in 1975. Although this pamphlet was claimed as a collective product of the group that had formed around Harry to do research and refine Harry’s analysis, it was primarily Harry’s work. Posthumously, two of his colleagues, Paul Liem and Eric Montague, stitched together parts of two of Harry’s essays and published it in 1985 in the *Review of Radical Political Economics* under the title “Toward a Marxist Theory of Racism.”

Around the same time, the numerous essays Harry had written became the basis of many study groups as well as an important part of the political strategies and practice of a number of different movement organizations: the Union of Democratic Filipinos (KDP), the Third World Women’s Alliance, the Northern California Alliance, several chapters of if not the entire Venceremos Brigade, the National

Committee to Overturn the Bakke Decision, and later the Line of March and the National Antiracist Organizing Committee.

Harry died a premature death from a brain tumor in 1979. So it was left to his political/intellectual successors to produce our own versions of his theory. Knowing Harry, he would probably not have been very satisfied with what the rest of us have done with what he taught us. But like or not, after his death, his work was carried on through three main branches (not to speak of hundreds of activists).

The first and perhaps least influential of these branches was produced by a group of Harry's closest associates during the 1970s. Although some of us had an unfortunate rift with Harry, our theoretical views on racism were directly shaped by him. Some of this work is found in "Towards a Communist Analysis of White Supremacy and Black Oppression," by Linda Burnham and Bob Wing; "Crossing Race and Nationality: The Racial Formation of Asian Americans," by Bob Wing; "The Filipino Nationality in the U.S.," by Bruce Occeña; and "The Mexican/Chicano Question in the United States," by Manuel Romero. As mentioned above, Harry's work also became a foundation of the political work of many movement organizations some of which continue in one form or another today.

A second branch of work was created by Neil Gotanda. Neil was also a part of the circle of people who worked closely with Harry in the 1970s. He went on to become a law professor and one of the founders of Critical Race Theory, one of the most influential and progressive trends in racism theory over the past decade or more. Neil was one of the editors of the seminal *Critical Race Theory: Key Writings that Formed the Movement*. He also wrote a number of powerful essays such as: "A Critique of 'Our Constitution is Colorblind,'" "Comparative Racialization: Racial Profiling and the Case of Wen Ho Lee," and "Critical Legal Studies, Critical Race Theory and Asian American Studies."

Howard Winant created a third branch. While considerably less connected to Harry than the other two branches, Howie was a member of one of the political organizations strongly influenced by Harry and participated in some of Harry's study groups in the 1970s. In 1986 Howie co-authored (with Michael Omi) *Racial Formation in the United States*, a book that transformed race theory, teaching, and scholarship throughout this country's universities and colleges. Howie has published several other important books on racism, but it is *Racial Formation* that bears the strongest marks of Harry's ideas.

None of these branches claim to be a direct elaboration of Harry's work and in fact there are considerable differences among and between them. But each has at its foundations Harry's insistence on distinguishing race from class, ethnicity, and nation; the view that racial categories are historical categories, rather than natural or genealogical, and subject to change over time (i.e., the process of racial formation); and the focus on how to connect racism to capitalism.



Harry was an extremely shy person. Although supremely confident in his intellectual capacity, he assiduously avoided the limelight. It didn't help that he always felt stalked by the South Korean CIA. Although his passions burned brightly within him and in his work, I doubt he had many regrets about the limited recognition he received. Still it is long past time that Harry received some of the credit that is his due for a productive lifetime brilliantly dedicated to socioeconomic and racial justice.

Harry Chang, *presente!*