

Richard Wright and The Marxist 'Left'

By **ABNER W. BERRY**

RICHARD WRIGHT reached the height of his powers as a writer in the decade between 1930 and 1940, as this nation and the world was beginning to react against the militant racism of Hitler. On the verge of World War II Wright's first novel, "Native Son" was published. In it Wright expressed his own doubts concerning the future of the American Negro; in fact, through his main character, Bigger Thomas, a Chicago slum-bred Negro, Wright sought to symbolize the mass of Negroes as helpless pawns of their segregated environment, capable of turning "either to fascism or Communism," according to Wright, himself. Through his portrayal of Communist characters in "Native Son," Wright also indicated his despair of white Americans ever understanding the "inscrutable" Negroes.



Wright was a Communist when "Native Son" was written and reviewers in the left-wing press praised it, almost uncritically, reading into it what obviously was not there. For history has proven that it was not the "challenge to our moral and economic order," as the New Masses reviewer saw it, nor did it reveal to the "world that the Communist Party is the only organization profoundly interested in relieving the plight of the Negro people," as the Daily Worker reviewer said. Actually the novel was the powerfully written work of an extremely talented writer containing a credo of cynicism and doubt. So powerful was the influence of "Native Son" on Negro writers that it affected negatively their production for more than ten years, reducing their works to pale reflections of Bigger and the other Wright characters.

It was a few years after the publication of "Native Son" in 1940 that Wright publicly left the Communist Party. Under present circumstances I am not prepared to say that he did not have unpleasant experiences in the party, but he could not have complained of unfair criticism of his writings. Wright possessed a snobbery which he could not hide when in the company of those less literate than himself; and his essays and biographical works abound in evidence of his attitude that "If I, a poor Negro, could achieve literary eminence, why do the rest of the Negroes act so much like sheep." His essay explaining why he left the Communist Party complains more against illiterate Negroes than about attempts to stifle his literary expression.

In that essay, though, Wright had one significant paragraph that deserves study today: "I remembered the stories I had written, the stories in which I had assigned a role of honor and glory to the Communist Party, and I was glad that they were down in black and white, were finished. For I knew in my heart that I should never be able to write that way again, should never be able to feel with that simple sharpness about life, should never again express such passionate hope, should never again make so total a commitment of faith." (*The God That Failed*, P. 162)

There is a pathos which rings genuine in those words, and maybe they indicate that Communists have reason to examine more closely their relationship with Wright and other artists who became "disenchanted"

Communists during the past 15 years. I write this despite what Wright has done; despite the fact that he wrote a bad novel in 1953—"The Outsider"—in which he sought further to justify his break with Communism, imputing to American Communists a grotesqueness which beggars description. Indeed, "The Outsider" was so far removed from reality, so inhuman and padded with phoney philosophical argumentation, that it fell with a dull thud on the book market.

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THE WORLD has moved during the past three years and so has Richard Wright. Turning to reportage, Wright visited the Gold Coast, West Africa, to report on the first British colony in Africa to win self-government. There were parts of his report in the book, "Black Power," which deserve close attention. For the Wright of "Black Power" is far removed from the author of "Native Son" and "The Outsider."

In reporting on what he found in the Gold Coast, Wright said frankly that he was drawing on experiences gained during his 12 years membership in the Communist Party. His analysis of the history of the Gold Coast and his bitter criticism of British colonial policy, he says, is Marxian, and defies would-be critics to give him a better method. The leaders of the Gold Coast freedom movement, he declared, could not have had the successes they are enjoying had they not come in contact with Communists in New York and London. But the difference, he quickly points out, is that they are seeking to apply Marxist methods in an African way and to African conditions.

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WRIGHT in reporting the Bandung Conference of Asian-African Nations in the book, "The Color Curtain," returns to the idea that socialism and education in the West has been one of the mainsprings of the revolutionary political movements in Asian countries. And he has some interesting analysis and descriptions of the fusion of politics, religion and communal organization in both books. Indeed, his anti-Communism in both books is the same kind of anti-Communism with which Nikita Khrushchev could be charged today. The "Communism" he describes and warns Asia against, is that which has been repudiated by Soviet Communists and all others who continue the fight for democratic Socialism.

I was disappointed in the review of "The Color Question" in both the Daily Worker and Masses and Mainstream. For the reviewers seemed to be arguing with "Native Son," and the Richard Wright of 1940 and 1944. Whereas, today, it is my opinion that we are confronted with a different person, one who has been profoundly affected by world events. He still has the defect of ignoring the illiterate masses and banking on the elite. He still is mystical and given to probing the primal emotions and ignoring the role of the social sciences. But both these books should be read. And while reading them the reader who is an adherent of the Left ought to get a new focus on Richard Wright and his relationship to events today. Remember, we praised him once when we should have been sharply critical of him as a close friend; let us not damn him now that he has moved a step or two in the direction of humanity. And are there not other writers with whom the Left should reexamine its relations?