

# OBAMA'S PROFESSOR AND AMERICA'S CULTURAL CRISIS



*"Cornel West is... a genius"*

-- Barack Obama

BY DAVID HOROWITZ

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# Hurricane West

By David Horowitz

Rarely has our country faced a more uncertain future under more troubling circumstances. We have been attacked by an enemy who is inspired by religious hatreds and is able to strike our homeland, something no adversary has been able to accomplish in modern times. Domestically, we are facing the greatest economic collapse in a generation, and our federal government is on its way to bankruptcy. Confronting these crises we are led by the most inexperienced, radical and divisive president in our nation's history, a man who has appeased our enemies and attacked our allies abroad and has authorized a government expansion at home that will create more debt in the next four years than previous presidents had

accumulated in the more than two hundred since our nation began.

Barack Obama's radical measures have prompted others to focus on the political breakdowns that characterize his administration – the disdain for bi-partisanship and traditional compromise, the disregard for constitutional process and the blunt contempt for the will of the voters who elected him. But politics is a reflection of forces that are ultimately rooted in a society's culture – the values and attitudes that shape its consciousness. These are the crucible of a nation's achievements and its armor against adversarial threats. A people proud of its heritage will fight for its survival; a people guilty before history will not. Hence a nation's fate is ultimately tied to the health of its culture. Underlying the present crisis is a breakdown of our culture that has been fifty years in the making, and cannot be altered by an election or two.

To measure the dimensions of our current predicament, there are few better indicators than the improbable career of a cultural icon and political radical named Cornel West, friend (and

former colleague) of President Barack Obama, man of vacuous ramblings and vaudevillian dimensions who is known affectionately to intimates as “Corn,” and to one Venezuelan acolyte as “Hurricane West.”<sup>1</sup>

Because of his cultural prominence and radical enthusiasms, West was named to the Council of Black Advisers of the Obama presidential campaign and introduced Obama on his first campaign stop in Harlem in 2007, calling the future president “my brother and my companion and comrade.” In return Obama called West “not only a genius, a public intellectual, an oracle... [but] also a loving person.”<sup>2</sup> West has also been a friend and campaigner for Bill Clinton, as well as political adviser to Senator Bill Bradley and Al Sharpton in their failed bids for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination in 2004.

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1 Cornel West, *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud*, 2009

2 Aaron Klein with Brenda J. Elliott, *The Manchurian President*, 2010, p.101

## The Resume

Cornel West is the recipient of tenured appointments (and six figure incomes) at four elite universities, including Harvard, Princeton and Yale, and has taught at the University of Paris. He has been awarded twenty honorary degrees and is the author of nineteen published books, two of which have made the *New York Times* best-seller list with over 100,000 hardcover copies sold. West is one of a handful of living authors included in the curriculum of Columbia University's great books program; there are more references to his work in academic professional journals than to fourteen of the other 17 designated "University Professors" on the Harvard faculty, and twice those of Harvard's ex-president, Larry Summers, himself a distinguished academic and former Secretary of the Treasury, now chairman of the White House Council of Economic Advisors.<sup>3</sup>

A rancorous quarrel between West and Summers in 2001 led to Summers' censure by his own faculty while West was promptly recruited

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<sup>3</sup> BW, p. and p. 227

for a prestigious post at Princeton. This was considered a momentous cultural event by the *New York Times*, which reported it on its frontpage as national news.

A tireless self-promoter, West refers to his own work as “prophetic” (“I am a prophetic Christian freedom fighter”) while the words “prophetic” or “prophesy” appear on the covers of four his books. A collection of casual pieces and reviews is titled *Prophetic Fragments* as though West were a contemporary of Ezekiel and the parchments containing his wisdom had been eaten away by time.

While West’s self-adulation has raised some eyebrows, it has proven infectious for others, inspiring a chorus of prominent imitators. Maya Angelou, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and sought-after speaker on the academic lecture-circuit tells us, “Cornel West thinks like a sage, acts like a warrior and writes like a poetical prophet.” Marian Wright Edelman, wife of a Kennedy adviser, friend of Hillary Clinton and head of the Children’s Defense Fund agrees: “Cornel West is one of the most authentic, prophetic and healing

voices in America today.”<sup>4</sup> *Time* and *Newsweek* laud him as a “brilliant scholar” and “an eloquent prophet,”<sup>5</sup> while Sam Tanenhaus, editor of the *New York Times Book Review* stepped forward as West’s defender in his confrontation with Harvard’s president. West is probably the only professor currently on a faculty who has had a school named after him, the oxymoronic Cornel West Academy of Excellence in Raleigh, North Carolina.<sup>6</sup>

His renown is not limited to his native shores: “What a blessing it was,” West writes in his autobiography, “to deliver the Edward Said Memorial Lecture in Cairo Egypt, the Nelson Mandela Lecture in Pretoria, South Africa, the UNESCO Lecture in Santiago, Chile, and the Albert Einstein Forum Lecture in Berlin, Germany.... I like seeing [my book] *Race Matters* translated into Japanese, Italian, and Portuguese. I like seeing [my book] *The American Evasion of Philosophy* translated into Chinese, Spanish

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4 *BW*, flap copy

5 *Ibid.*

6 *BW*, p.250



and Italian. I like that there are hundreds of thousands of copies of my book *Democracy Matters* translated into Spanish.... I like the fact that all nineteen of my books are still in print with the exception of the two that won the American Book Award in 1993.... I like the fact that seven insightful books, both scholarly and mainstream have been published on my life and work.”<sup>7</sup>

West prides himself on the homage he has received from the popular culture as well: “I like the fact that the beautiful ‘Cornel West Wall’ exists on Martin Luther King Boulevard in Trenton, New Jersey. I am grateful for the illustrious talent of artist Luv One [who painted it].... I like that the remarkable young hip-hop artist Lupe Fiasco [sic] has honored me by naming his Grammy-nominated album *The Cool* after a lecture I gave in Chicago.... I like performing with those bebop jazz giants, the Heath Brothers...I like that on my most recent CD, *Never Forget: A Journey of Revelations*, I collaborated with outstanding artists like Talib Kweli, KRS-One, Jill Scott, Andre 3000, and Cliff West [his brother]. I was

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<sup>7</sup> *BW*, pp. 247-8

delighted to be named MTV Artist of the Week and gratified when the album hit the Billboard charts: #1 Spoken Word and #37 R&B/Hip Hop. I like the thrill of collaborating with the incomparable musical genius of our time, Prince... I like that these days more people recognize me from my little movie roles than my books... Ironically, I made my film debut in *The Matrix Reloaded*, the movie that broke all existing box office records.

### The Man

Who is this individual who has attained such prominence and high regard in our culture? In a new self-portrait called *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud* (and don't even try to parse that title), West answers the question in an epigraph which he wrote himself:

*"I'm a bluesman in the life of the mind, and a jazzman in the world of ideas." – Cornel West*

Like many passages in his work – indeed like the intellectual life of the man himself – these words are an emotional riff, a substitute for thought and do not make any sense. "But what does it mean

to be a bluesman in the life of the mind?” West asks himself, and answers: “I try to give heart to the intellect by being true to the funk [sic] of living. For me this can only be seen through the lens of the cross and realized in the light of love.” These are the “reasons,” he explains, that “I greet each person struggling through time and space in search of love and meaning before they die as brother or sister no matter what their color.”<sup>8</sup>

Soapy sentiment aside, not everyone “no matter what their color” is the beneficiary of West’s profligate and vaporous love (even my used copy of this book is signed to no one in particular, “Love, Cornel West”). Charity is certainly not extended to those who stand in the way of the progressive bandwagon which West has ridden to his present heights. An entire chapter of his autobiography, for example, is devoted to his conflict with Harvard’s president, whom he portrays as a liar and a racist.

West is a frequent speaker at the church of Jeremiah Wright, former spiritual mentor to the

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8 *BW*, p. 5

President, and refers to the well-known race-hater as “my dear brother” and “a prophetic Christian preacher.” He is specifically determined to defend Wright’s notorious anathema – “God *damn* America.” According to West, it is the function of prophetic Christians such as Wright to *call on* God to damn America, because America is no different from every nation that treats its citizens as “less than human...”<sup>9</sup>

As an academic celebrity, West is annually invited to deliver more than a hundred speeches on university campuses at fees ranging from \$10,000 to \$35,000 a performance. “For me, these lectures were not simply money-making gigs,” he explains, “but occasions to make the world my classroom” and (with the unanchored grandiosity that is his trademark) to make “all people my congregation,”<sup>10</sup> Those who attend West’s lectures are treated to oracular wisdom like the following selected at random from West’s 2008 book *Hope on a Tightrope: Words and Wisdom*.

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9 Cornel West, *Hope on a Tightrope: Words and Wisdom*, 2008 (Kindle Edition), loc. 1350-60

10 *BW*, p. 185

West's view of us:

- You're made in the image of God. You're a featherless, two-legged, linguistically conscious creature born between urine and feces. That's us. One day your body will be the culinary delight of terrestrial worms....The question is: Who are you going to be in the meantime, in this time and space? You don't get out of time and space alive.<sup>11</sup>

West's view of Christ:

- Behold, that first century Palestinian Jew was born in a funky manger. He had some funky working-class parents sometimes dealing with unemployment and underemployment. He walked on some funky and dusty roads, didn't he? He brought together 12 funky folk. He didn't go out 100 miles to the vanilla suburbs, did he? He gathered them right from around where he came from. It's so easy to forget the funk in Jesus's life

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11 West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, op. cit, loc 262-267

because our churches can become so easily deodorized.<sup>12</sup>

But while his audiences nod agreeably at this mumbo-jumbo, treating it as a discourse that somehow makes sense, what they really come to hear are the progressive insults to their country and their countrymen, which West serves up at every venue and every turn:

If you view America from the Jamestown Colony, America is a corporation before it's a country. If it's a corporation before it is a country, then white supremacy is married to capitalism. Therefore, white supremacy is something that is so deeply grounded in white greed, hatred, and fear that it constitutes the very foundation for ...[a] ... democracy called the U.S.A.<sup>13</sup>

At the Lannan Foundation in New Mexico where he was given an arts award in 2003, West elaborated:

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12 CW, *Hope on a Tightrope*, op. cit. loc 607-12

13 CW, *Hope on a Tightrope*, op. cit. loc 406-12

American imperial expansion fascinates me. We're talking about the invasion of Iraq. It's the first time America invaded a country. Whoa! [Laughter] My God, really. Grenada, Panama, we can go right down the line. [Applause] But no, 1783, George Washington himself says that we do not want to involve ourselves with the affairs of Europe, but we do expect expansion of population and territory. You say, Mr. Washington, there's some people on that land you have in mind - [laughter] - human beings whose lives are just as valuable as yours, on intimate terms with death, with imperial expansion. The same would be true with Latino brothers and sisters, with moving borders: Mexico one day, U.S. the next. It's not mediated with argument. It's imperial expansion. Forms of death. Struggle for black freedom. Civic death. Jim Crow. Jane Crow. Lynching. I'd call it American terrorism.<sup>14</sup>

Others might call it incoherent claptrap. But

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.lannan.org/docs/cornel-west-030625-trans-read.pdf>

whatever it is it certainly isn't Christian outreach, despite West's repeated assertion that these words bubble up from a spiritual spring: "I cannot overstate my relationship to Jesus Christ." "My foundation consists of three powerful elements: family, the Socratic spirituality of seeking truth, and the Christian spirituality of bearing witness to love and justice."<sup>15</sup>

### Love Affair With Racists

One of the instructive anomalies revealed in West's self-portrait is how much of his love is directed towards figures whose racial and religious malice are their defining features.

The black theologian James Cone is introduced in West's bluesman *patois*: "I remember going with my colleagues to a conference at Yale. It was a big-time gathering of the most celebrated theologians in the world. When I walked into that hall with my brothers – James Cone, Jim Washington and Jim Forbes – man I felt like we were the Dramatics walking on stage at the

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<sup>15</sup> *BW*, p. 22



Apollo.”<sup>16</sup>

James Cone is the founder of “black theology,” a racist creed, which is built on such canonical sentiments as this: “Theologically, Malcolm X was not far wrong when he called the white man ‘the devil’,” and “What we need is the destruction of whiteness, which is the source of human misery in the world.”<sup>17</sup>

But a hater like Cone is far from anomalous in West’s circle of friends. As an undergraduate at Harvard, young Corn was elected co-president of the Black Student Association, in which capacity he invited prominent speakers: “At the top of my list was Imamu Amiri Baraka, a seminal man of letters, a revolutionary black nationalist and a mesmerizing poet. I had the high honor of introducing him.”<sup>18</sup> Amiri Baraka aka LeRoi Jones was also by then a notorious black racist and gay-basher (“Most white men are trained to be fags. For this reason it is no wonder their

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16 *BW*, p. 103

17 <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/individualProfile.asp?indid=2315>

18 *BW*, p. 70

faces are weak and blank...”) and anti-Semite (“Smile jew. Dance jew. Tell me you love me, jew. I got something for you now, though....I got the extermination blues, jew boys”<sup>19</sup>).

These rancid statements are absorbed and disappear into the jive ecumenical miasma of West’s “thought.” All that matters to West is that his “brother” Baraka is a fellow progressive at war with imperial America and its “white supremacist” masters.

By the early Seventies when West tendered the invitation to Baraka, the Harvard community no longer had the moral intelligence to be appalled by such a gesture. When the event took place, the malice-drenched “poet,” Baraka, actually turned on his host attacking him as “a two-bit Eurocentric wrong-headed boot-licking pseudo Marxist slave to Western thought.”<sup>20</sup> And West just stood there with the indomitable gap-toothed smile that was to become the signature of his public persona.

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19 <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/individualProfile.asp?indid=2171>

20 *BW*, p. 70

West then spent several decades wooing the racist Baraka until he became a family friend, so much so that in the service of this friendship West campaigned for his son when he ran for elective office in New Jersey. By this time, despite hateful attitudes which would have made Baraka a social pariah had he been white, he was instead the recipient of prestigious grants from the Rockefeller and Guggenheim foundations, had won the PEN/Faulkner Award, was a professor at Rutgers and had also been appointed Poet Laureate of New Jersey. All these accolades were signs of the cultural breakdown that was making possible the success of figures like West himself. Baraka was eventually defrocked as professor and poet laureate after finally going a bridge too far by writing a poem blaming 9/11 on the Jews called "Somebody Blew Up America."<sup>21</sup> The author of *Brother West* fails to mention any of these details. A progressive like West, secure in his own sense of himself as a prophet of the just and the good, does not feel the need to explain his adulation of a bigot so long as the bigot is black and therefore

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21 <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/individualProfile.asp?indid=2171>

“oppressed.”

Another troublesome visitor to Harvard during Corn's undergraduate years was a spokesman for the Nation of Islam, the black supremacist church of Elijah Muhammad. As West reports, “We black students were curious, eager, and excited to see what George X, the minister representing the Honorable Elijah Muhammad had to say. We packed the hall.”<sup>22</sup> The warm reception afforded by Harvard students to an emissary from a racist cult was another index of the ominous cultural turn America was taking. The so-called Honorable Elijah was the prophet of a religion in which white people were described as “blue-eyed devils” and said to be the invention of a mad scientist named Yacub who created them 6,000 years before in an experiment that went awry. During the mishap their blood was allegedly diluted causing a melanin deficiency that made them morally defective. The crackpot Muhammad prophesied a coming Armageddon in which God would destroy the white devil race and bring to an end the problems that white people had created,

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<sup>22</sup> *BW*, p. 67

which according to him were the source of all human suffering.<sup>23</sup>

That Harvard students would flock to hear the spokesman for a bigoted nutcase and a religion of hate, let alone consider themselves “honored” by his presence was in itself a noteworthy event. Prior to the cultural upheaval of the 1960s, which continued to loom over America like a toxic airborne event for decades to come, no such episode could have taken place in any institution of higher learning, let alone an Ivy League school.

“The minister began speaking,” West begins his account of George X’s visit. “He was an articulate and intelligent man, but when he referred to Malcolm X as a ‘dog,’ I was startled. Though Malcolm had been shot six years earlier, his murder still felt painfully close. The minister’s speech went on, and then, for no apparent reason, he found it necessary to call Malcolm ‘dog’ a second time. I was about to say something, but my friends, seeing I was agitated, restrained

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23 [www.discoverthenetworks.org/individualProfile.asp?indid=1581](http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/individualProfile.asp?indid=1581)

me. There were hefty Fruit of Islam guards, the paramilitary wing of the Nation, stationed at all the doors. I swallowed hard and let it pass. But the minister went out of his way to call Malcolm a ‘dog’ for the third time, I couldn’t take it. I jumped up and spoke my mind.

“I said, ‘Who gives you the authority to call someone who loved black people so deeply a ‘dog’?”

“‘Young man,’ the minister said, seething with rage, ‘you best be careful. You’re being highly disrespectful and impudent.’”<sup>24</sup>

When West refused to apologize, the spokesman for the Nation of Islam threatened him: ‘Young brother, you’ll be lucky to get out of this building alive. And if you do manage to slip out, you’ll be gone in five days.’”

Fully up to the melodrama, West proclaimed his defiance: “Well, if that’s the only response to my challenge, then I guess you’re just going to

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24 *BW*, pp. 68-70

have to take me out.”<sup>25</sup>

A striking aspect of West’s account of the incident is that it makes no mention of the well-known fact that Malcolm X was murdered by Nation of Islam assassins on a death warrant issued by Elijah Muhammad and publicly proclaimed by his lieutenant Louis Farrakhan. Why would it seem “shocking” that a Nation spokesman would refer to Malcolm as a “dog?”

The sins committed by Malcolm that warranted his execution were finally rejecting Elijah Muhammad’s racist bigotry and, worse, revealing that the honorable one was a rapist who had impregnated several adolescents in his otherwise strictly puritanical cult. West was certainly aware of these facts but fails to mention them or to explain why he would have such respect – then and now – for such violent and degenerate criminals and their defenders.

Instead, writing with 40 years hindsight, West actually concedes to his Muslim accuser that “[Malcolm] was wrong to have castigated the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

Honorable Elijah Muhammad in public,” then adds in bluesman jive: “and God knows, following Malcolm’s lead, I had hardly been discreet in castigating George X. But when the Four Tops sang ‘I Can’t Help Myself,’ they might as well have been talking about me.”<sup>26</sup> (When a Harvard professor thinks and writes like this, Houston, we have a problem.)

Rescued from the lecture hall by friends, West immediately went into hiding: “I went underground. I kept moving around from dorm room to dorm room, staying with various friends who had my back. I was afraid to attend class.... For as long as I was on the Nation’s most wanted list, I didn’t get a good night’s sleep.”

This life-threatening experience seems not to have had any impact on Cornel West’s admiration for the Nation thugs. Instead of reporting what had taken place to university administrators and protecting other students from being the target of similar threats, West sought out another Harvard undergraduate who was “one of the most

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<sup>26</sup> *BW*, p. 68



prominent Black Muslims on campus” to try to mediate his predicament. West told the Muslim he was interested in hearing his own take on what had happened, which led to this strange dialogue:

“From the Nation’s point of view, you disrespected one of our ministers, just as Malcolm disrespected the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. Do you realize what Minister Muhammad meant to Malcolm?”

“‘I do,’ I said. ‘I’ve always believed that there’s no Malcolm without Elijah....But you all be calling the brother a dog, and I can never allow that. Not in public. That’s a level of disrespect that’s too much.’”<sup>27</sup>

Further conversation led to “exploring each other’s backgrounds [and] we got closer [until] empathy overwhelmed anger. By the end of the evening, the brother assured me that all was cool.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *BW*, p. 69

<sup>28</sup> *BW*, pp. 69-70

And that is the end of the incident as related not by the 19-year- old student at Harvard but by the Princeton professor and friend of the President now in his late fifties and with a lifetime of experience behind him. *There's no Malcolm without Elijah.* True enough if one is referring to the racial demagogue that Malcolm was before he turned against his mentor and his religion of hate. It was Elijah who taught Malcolm to regard white people as blue-eyed devils who would be destroyed on the Day of Judgment and also taught Malcolm to encourage violence against them. This was why Malcolm denounced Martin Luther King's historic civil rights march as "ridiculous" and preached the bullet over the ballot and why King refused to appear on the same platform with him as long as he still adhered to Elijah's doctrines.

Malcolm X grew out of these venomous prejudices, causing him to come into fatal collision with the Nation and its new spokesman and eventual leader, Louis Farrakhan. What does the mature Cornel West have to say about this legacy? "Though I am a Martin Luther King Jr.

kind of brother, the fiery passion for racial justice and deep love for black people found in the often misunderstood lineage from Malcolm X to Minister Louis Farrakhan will always be part of me.”<sup>29</sup>

But Louis Farrakhan was the bloody-minded bigot who issued the *fatwa*, that led to Malcolm’s assassination: “The die is set, and Malcolm shall not escape, especially after such evil, foolish talk about his benefactor; such a man is worthy of death...”<sup>30</sup> It is moral idiocy to refer to the “lineage” from Malcolm X to his assassin Minister Louis Farrakhan, let alone to embrace it. It is perverse to regard the surrender to racism as reflecting a “deep love for black people” rather than a hatred for whites, and it is willful blindness not to see Malcolm’s defection as an attempt to break free from a totalitarian cult which was (and still is) destructive to the cause of racial harmony and the well-being of African Americans.

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29 *BW*, p. 23

30 <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/individualProfile.asp?indid=1325>




## Cheerleader for Marxism

The ethical dimensions of the conflict between Malcolm and Elijah and Farrakhan are simply beyond Cornel West's moral comprehension, which is no small matter for someone who presents himself as a prophet of rectitude and claims to follow the path of Jesus. Such political narcissism is typical of West's progressive generation. The very nobility of their cause, in their own minds serves to erase the "mistakes" they make along the way.

The same myopia is on display regarding the moral issues raised by Communism and the role progressives played as an auxiliary force in the atrocities that were committed in the name of social justice. During the Soviet nightmare, American progressives denied and even defended the crimes Communists engaged in, worked through peace movements to cripple the military defenses of the western democracies, and conducted relentless propaganda crusades to delegitimize their free societies.<sup>31</sup>

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31 David Horowitz, *The Politics of Bad Faith*, 1998



But this self-described moral teacher and disciple of Socrates and Christ, has nothing to say about the collusion of progressives in the worst episode of mass murder and human oppression in recorded history. Instead, West is the proud co-chair of the “Democratic Socialists of America” an organization that defines its position on the left as “anti-anti-Communist” – that is, as an opponent of those who opposed Communism and supported America’s Cold War against the Soviet gulag. West is also an enthusiastic member of the academic movement to resurrect the ideas that inspired Communism, burnishing the escutcheons of Stalinist intellectuals such as Gyorgy Lukacs, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser and Eric Hobsbawm, all heroes of the current university establishment. West, himself is the author of books devoted to this resurrection project, including *Black Theology and Marxist Thought* and *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*, his first book.

West is not only a cheerleader for corrupt but intellectually worthy Marxists, he is also a promoter of Maoist charlatans such as

Bob Avakian, the American founder of the Revolutionary Communist Party, a violent fringe cult. Calling himself “Chairman” as an homage to his hero, Avakian is the author of such inane titles as *Mao Tse-Tung’s Immortal Contribution* and *Radical Ruptures: or Yes, Mao More Than Ever*, along with an autobiography, *From Ike to Mao and Beyond*. Its preface, written by a member of the cult, credits Cornel West with inspiring the book: “A short time back, Cornel West, speaking to the important role Bob Avakian has played in the fight against white supremacy and in relation to the quest for a radically different world, suggested to Bob that he think about a memoir of his life so far.” When the book was completed, West provided his comrade with this blurb: “Bob Avakian is a long distance runner in the freedom struggle against imperialism, racism and capitalism. His voice and witness are indispensable in our efforts to enhance the wretched of the earth. And his powerful story of commitment is timely.”<sup>32</sup>

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32 Bob Avakian, *From Ike to Mao and Beyond*, 2005

## Brother to Anti-Semites

West's emergence as a prominent public intellectual occurred in the 1990s and was facilitated by his decision to assume a role as a bridge builder between blacks and Jews at a time of crisis between the two communities. In August 1991, an orthodox Jew named Yankel Rosenbaum was lynched in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn during a race riot featuring cries of "Death to the Jews" and an incendiary anti-Semitic speech by the Reverend Al Sharpton. Sharpton was also prominent in a second attack, inciting his followers to lay siege to a Jewish-owned store in Harlem to drive out the "white interloper." The store was set on fire by a member of Sharpton's organization and seven customers and employees – all black and Hispanic – died in the flames.<sup>33</sup>

These incidents were accompanied by blatant anti-Semitic outbursts from prominent literary and political figures in the African American community including, of course, Amiri Baraka,

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33 [www.discoverthenetworks.org/individualProfile.asp?indid=1527](http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/individualProfile.asp?indid=1527)

but also Jesse Jackson (who referred to New York as “hymietown”), Sharpton, onetime SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael, and Louis Farrakhan. Farrakhan, as usual, went the extra step: “You [Jews] are wicked deceivers of the American people,” Farrakhan ranted on one occasion. “You have sucked their blood. You are not real Jews (who everyone knows were black). You are the synagogue of Satan, and you have wrapped your tentacles around the U.S. government, and you are deceiving and sending this nation to hell... But if you choose to crucify me, know that Allah will crucify you.”<sup>34</sup> It only made matters worse that in 1995 Farrakhan was able to organize a “Million Man March” on Washington, attracting to his podium mainstream figures in the African American community, including Martin Luther King III and Cornel West.

The legitimization of anti-Semitism as a public discourse so soon after the Holocaust was a profound shock to American Jews, who were also disheartened by the fact that such bigots

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/individualProfile.asp?indid=1325>



remained prominent national figures rather than suffering the kind of social ostracism that would have been the fate of whites who had made similar comments against blacks. West stepped into the middle of this *kulturkampf* as one of the few black figures even willing to recognize that black anti-Semitism might be something to be concerned about. “As to anti-Semitism the first step is to get our community to acknowledge that there is a problem...”he wrote in a book published in 1995.<sup>35</sup>

But even this worthy effort came with caveats, the first being that the problem shouldn’t be made too important (“You’ve got to acknowledge anti-Semitism, but not make it seem that you think that it is the major moral problem facing our community”<sup>36</sup>) and second that even its most virulent exponents – Farrakhan being the obvious example – should get a pass: “I wouldn’t call the brother a racist... but a xenophobic spokesperson when it comes to dealing with Jewish humanity –

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35 Michael Lerner and Cornel West, *Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin*, 1995, p. 249

36 Ibid.

but who in his own way loves black folk deeply, and that love is what we see first.”As the *New Republic*’s literary editor was shortly to say of West, “Nothing of his own is alien to him. He finds human truths in inhuman lies.”<sup>37</sup>

Finding a partner for his ecumenical gestures, West joined forces with Michael Lerner,<sup>38</sup> a sixties radical who had founded the “Seattle Liberation Front” a violent “guerrilla” group that emulated the Communist Vietcong. Subsequently a reconstructionist rabbi and the editor of *Tikkun* magazine, Lerner presented himself as a “pro-Israel” Jew but condemned Israel’s “occupation” of Arab lands and called on Jews “to atone for the pain we have inflicted on the Palestinian people” – a piece of historical illiteracy on a par with West’s ramblings, since Israel was created out of the ruins of the Turkish empire which was not Arab and the Arabs had waged five aggressive wars against Israel and still refused to accept Israel’s existence, which explained the so-called

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37 Leon Wieseltier, “The Unreal World of Cornel West,” *The New Republic*, March 6, 1995

38 <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/individualProfile.asp?indid=632>

“occupation.”<sup>39</sup>

As part of a campaign to build bridges, Lerner and West co-authored a book of conversations between them on the subject, called *Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin*. The “significant thinkers,” as Senator Bill Bradley called West and Lerner in a blurb for the book, also embarked on a year-long lecture tour to address the issue.<sup>40</sup> “I loved the black-Christian, white-Jewish connection...” wrote West of the experience of becoming progressively kosher. “In prophetic Judaism, as in Amos and Isaiah, justice is already universal. As a Jewish brother, Jesus is confirming this concept. Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus is already on board the love train.”<sup>41</sup>

But even the West-Lerner love train could not avoid the poisonous currents roiling the left and still washing up on our political shores in a renewed left anti-Semitism today. When West

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39 <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/groupProfile.asp?grpid=6204>

40 Michael Lerner and Cornel West, *Jews & Blacks: Let the Healing Begin*, op., cit.

41 *BW*, p. 187

and Lerner showed up at a black bookstore in Oakland, members of the Nation of Islam were there for a reprise the incident at Harvard twenty years before. “At first the discussion went reasonably well,” recalls West. “Then Michael said the words. ‘Louis Farrakhan is a dog.’”<sup>42</sup>

The visitors responded: “You’re a dog,” and it went downhill from there. West intervened and was able to get the Nation members to back off, while he berated Lerner: “Rabbi, I’m not sure you want to go around calling someone’s spiritual leader and my dear brother a dog.”<sup>43</sup>

There was another incident at Howard University, when Lerner referred to Farrakhan as an anti-Semite. Someone in the audience objected and Lerner responded: “If you had read more books about the history of anti-Semitism, you wouldn’t ask such an inane question.” West jumped in: “That’s the kind of arrogance that trumps any kind of conversation. Many black people associate that kind of arrogance with Jewish brothers and sisters who claim to be

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> *BW*, pp. 187-188

concerned about them. That's the stereotype. We're on tour trying to shatter the stereotype that, ironically, you're reinforcing here."<sup>44</sup>

Despite West's regard for the leading promoter of anti-Semitic hatred as his "dear brother" and "friend," Lerner continued to embrace him as an ally and more: "I not only came to respect Cornel West's incredible intellect," Lerner writes in their joint book, "but to love him."<sup>45</sup>

### Intellectually Negligible

At about the same time as the love train tour, the literary editor of *The New Republic* finally had enough of progressives' growing love-fest with Cornel West. In a 5500-word article trumpeted on the magazine's cover as "The Decline of the Black Intellectual" Leon Wieseltier punctured West's intellectual balloon and challenged his overblown public reputation in a piece from which West never should have recovered.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Lerner and Cornel West, op., cit. p. 6

Wieseltier, a liberal, began by describing West as “a good man, an enemy of enmity,” which was obviously not the case, but which made Wieseltier’s testimony even more damning. “Since there is no crisis in America more urgent than the crisis of race, and since there is no intellectual in America more celebrated for his consideration of the crisis of race, I turned to West, and read his books. They are almost completely worthless... West’s work is noisy, tedious, slippery..., sectarian, humorless, pedantic and self endeared.”<sup>46</sup>

Wieseltier described West’s judgment of ideas as “eccentric” (a kindness), and provided multiple examples of Westian absurdities to support his case: “[West] observes that ‘black America has yet to produce a great literate intellectual with the exception of Toni Morrison;’ that ‘Marx and Emerson herald self-realization and promote democracy;’... that ‘Marxist thought becomes even more relevant after the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe than it was before;’ that ‘World War Two

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<sup>46</sup> Leon Wieseltier, *op. cit.*

was a major setback for anti-imperialist struggles in black America;’ that ‘inter-subjectivity is the go-cart of individuality;’... that ‘crack is the postmodern drug;’ that ‘the classical Marxist critique of religion is not an a priori rejection of religion;’ and so on.”<sup>47</sup>

In his autobiography West admits that he was wounded by this attack but offers an anemic response. “Socratic questioning – and challenging – is at the very heart of my being,” he writes. “But Wieseltier had no interest in challenging or questioning. He was intent on demonstrating that my life’s work was a farce and I was a fraud. He was, in fact, not only dishonoring the tradition of honest exchange but corrupting it with ruthless character assassination.”<sup>48</sup>

This was dismissal rather than self-defense, providing no come-back to the actual critique in which Wieseltier provided example after example of West’s intellectual vacuity and preposterous ideas. The fact that Wieseltier’s charges of incoherence went unanswered only underscored

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> *BW*, p. 189

the degree to which they hit the bulls-eye.

West survived the attack because even those intellectuals on the left who understood that Wieseltier had made a case did not want to see their champion taken out of the culture war. Writing in the *Village Voice*, feminist Ellen Willis conceded that West was someone who had been “lionized instead of engaged, over-praised and discreetly under-criticized,” but then defended him with this plaint: “The left is a small beleaguered world these days and Cornel is a friend.”<sup>49</sup>

This notion of the left’s beleagueredness was hardly an accurate description of progressives’ place in the Clinton era. In reality, they were an increasingly dominant force in the universities, enjoyed a sympathetic media and had a friend in the White House. But the protection of someone who had become a symbol of their causes from affirmative action through the litany of progressive grievance took precedence over other considerations as they circled their wagons.

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49 <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/04/16/books/skirmishes-the-decline-of-discourse.html?pagewanted=all>



## Confrontation at Harvard

Five years after the Wieseltier broadside, progressives made a last notable attempt to clean up the public embarrassment that West had become. This led to the famous confrontation with the president of Harvard. As one of Harvard's 18 designated "University Professors" (out of a faculty of 2,000) West occupied a privileged height even at that elite school. He was attached to no department or program, able to teach whatever he wanted, and required to report only to the president himself.<sup>50</sup> In October 2001, President Summers called West to his office to express concern that the professor was not meeting Harvard's academic standards.

Assuming one can trust West's account, Summers opened their encounter with a particularly crass effort to pander to his reputation as a faculty radical. According to West, Summers attempted to solicit help in harassing the only open conservative remaining on the Harvard faculty, Harvey Mansfield.

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<sup>50</sup> *BW*, pp. 218-219

To break the ice, he told me I was just the man to help him undermine Professor Harvey Mansfield. In describing his desire to upset Mansfield, Summers used a language that he thought I'd find familiar.

“Help me fuck him up,” he said.<sup>51</sup>

West refused, telling Summers that “despite the intensity and intellectual ferocity that marked my debates with Mansfield,...I considered Mansfield my brother.”<sup>52</sup> When this surreal moment of somewhat dubious factuality was concluded, Summers got down to his business, complaining that West had cancelled three weeks of classes (a charge West denies) in order to work as political adviser to Senator Bill Bradley's campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. Summers added, “I also don't understand why in the world you would then go on to support another presidential candidate who didn't even have a remote chance of winning....No one respects him.”<sup>53</sup> This was a reference to Al Sharpton whose

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51 *BW*, p. 218

52 *BW*, p. 218

53 *BW*, p. 219

campaign West joined in the same capacity when Bradley dropped out of the race.

Summers then turned to West's scholarly work, or lack thereof, telling him he needed to "write an important book on a philosophical tradition to establish your authority and secure your place as a scholar." Summers was quite specific. West needed to produce work that was noted in "peer-reviewed" scholarly journals and not just in popular magazines such as *Time* and the *New York Review of Books*. Finally, Summers was distressed that his professor had spent the previous year composing a "rap" album called *Sketches of My Culture* which featured West himself as the rapper. Here Summers' comment was particularly blunt: "Professor West, you have to cease making rap albums which are an embarrassment to Harvard."

It was a quixotic attempt to uphold an academic standard that had long ago been shredded when West was elevated to an elite faculty such as Harvard (let alone to University Professor). But Cornel West was used to riding the waves of racial grievance to unearned successes. For thirty years

the race card had trumped all standards to benefit West, and he was not about to be intimidated even by a powerful university president and former Secretary of the Treasury:

“Professor Summers, when you say ‘an embarrassment to Harvard,’ which Harvard are you talking about?”




“The Harvard I have been hired to lead.”

“But your Harvard, Professor Summers, is not my Harvard. And I’m as much Harvard as you are. Look, we all know that Harvard has a white supremacist legacy, a male supremacist legacy, an anti-Semitic legacy, a homophobic legacy. We also know that Harvard has a legacy that’s critical of those legacies. That’s the Harvard I relate to.”<sup>54</sup>

If the dispute had been over an affirmative action sinecure rather than the academic duties of a faculty member at one of the world’s pre-eminent research institutions, West’s argument may have had


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54 *BW*, pp. 219-220



some purchase. Instead, it only exposed the subversive agendas of the tenured left, in particular its determination to make the university into a political instrument promoting its own worldview. It also revealed the lack of allegiance that faculty radicals such as West had to the institutions that employed them, and for that matter towards their country as well. For progressives such as West, just as there were two Harvards there were two Americas – an America whose reality was “imperialist,” “racist,” and “white supremacist,” with which they were at war, and an America whose “legacy” was their fantasy of a multicultural redemption from the sinful present, which was the only one they were prepared to defend.

On leaving Summers’ office, West laid plans to turn his back on Harvard and accept the invitation that had been already tendered by the president of Princeton. As for Harvard’s president, West announced that Larry Summers had “a problem with black people,” and further: “Larry Summers is the Ariel Sharon of American higher education.” This was a snickering reference to the Prime



Minister of Israel who had been demonized by Palestinian terrorists and their sympathizers in the American left. “The man’s arrogant, he’s an ineffective leader,” West said of his boss, “and when it comes to these sorts of delicate situations, he’s a bull in the China shop.”<sup>55</sup>

Of the two antagonists, it was West who had the superior sense of his audience. In short order faculty progressives rose to his defense while Larry Summers was down on his knees apologizing for his insensitivity and begging West not to leave. But it was already too late. Summers had previously provoked West’s progressive colleagues by decrying their campaign to divest in Israel and undermine the Jewish state as it confronted enemies dedicated to its destruction. “Profoundly anti-Israel views are increasingly finding support in progressive intellectual communities,” Summers had impolitically declared. “Serious and thoughtful people are advocating and taking actions that are anti-Semitic in their

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<sup>55</sup> *BW*, p. 228

effect...”<sup>56</sup> Cornel West was one of those people.

While West went on to Princeton, Summers continued on his way to becoming the first president in the history of the modern research university to be censured by his own faculty (or the ten percent of those who bothered to vote), and then forced to resign from his post. The denouement came months later, after a second conflict with Harvard feminists who were outraged by his expression of the politically incorrect idea that men might have higher aptitudes in mathematics than women (arguably a scientific fact). In the battle over this *faux pas*, ideologically driven (and anti-intellectual) members of the Harvard faculty were able to prevail, despite the support Summers received from a group of Harvard donors headed by David Rockefeller which withheld \$400 million in pledged funds in a vain effort to save him.<sup>57</sup>

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56 [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/talking/12\\_Divest.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/talking/12_Divest.html)



57 <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/06194/705613-28.stm>

## Progressive Spear-Carrier


West's victory in this as in other battles was only possible because of his role as a symbol of progressive aspirations and amplifier of its favorite clichés. These included his view of himself as a perennial racial victim, his opposition to America's role as a defender of individual freedom, his support for Arab aggressors and portrayal of them as victims of the Jewish state, his condemnation of American society as racist, sexist and unjust, and his resurrection of Marxist delusions about a socialist future. West's tireless promotion of progressive shibboleths ensured the support of Harvard's radical faculty as well as cultural institutions like the *New York Times*, which swallowed hard at repeated examples of his intellectual vacuity and rallied to his cause. There is no other explanation for the ability of a shallow, vain, and trivial intellect, a comrade of anti-Semites and violent racists, and friend to America's enemies, to attain the cultural eminence that Cornel West has achieved.

In the end this disturbing saga cannot be viewed in isolation as though it was the story of a single





individual. For it could not have taken place were it not also the story of what has happened to America's culture – to the institutional standards that support its achievements and the intellectual skepticism that keeps it honest. It is the story of values and constraints that have been removed to make possible a career as morally and intellectually offensive as it is socially and politically influential. Therefore, it is the story of innumerable public careers that time and space will not allow us to review. It is what has happened to our nation since Cornel West was admitted to Harvard University nearly half a century ago.



In the intervening years, the progressive left has mounted a relentless assault on America's heritage and its institutional framework and the society that both produced. The assault has been both historical – indicting the builders of this nation as agents of bigotry and oppression – and current: condemning America's wars for freedom as imperial aggressions of greed and conquest. It is an assault powered by hatred of others – white people, successful people, males, Jews, Christians (if they are white), and businessmen

— who are held accountable for the America that progressives despise.

Cornel West has been a potent pamphleteer in this corrosive cause. In 2004, he published a screed called *Democracy Matters*, which sold 100,000 copies and made it to the fifth slot on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Its subtitle explained its purpose: “Winning the Fight Against Imperialism,” namely America. Yet in a sign of the changed times, the book was hailed by the very establishment on which America has showered its many privileges — the *Washington Post* and the *Boston Globe*, which described West’s diatribe as written “in the vein of Socrates.”

For West and progressives like him, the democracy that matters is not the one we live in but the so called economic “democracy” that Marx and Lenin and their disciples promised, and then discredited by piling up continents of corpses in the futile effort to realize their utopian schemes. Of America’s actual democracy, West has this to say: “The American democratic experience is unique in human history not because we are God’s chosen people to lead the world or because we are

always a force for good in the world, but because of our refusal to acknowledge the deeply racist and imperial roots of our democratic project.”<sup>58</sup>

For West the great conflict of our times has been provoked by America’s imperial aggressions. “Let us not be deceived,” he writes: “the great dramatic battle of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is the dismantling of empire.”<sup>59</sup> And, of course, the empire that needs to be dismantled is ours.

According to West, the greatest threats of our era are “three dominating, anti-democratic dogmas.” The first is “free market fundamentalism – just as dangerous as the religious fundamentalisms of our day.” In other words, just as threatening as the bigoted and bloodthirsty creeds of our terrorist enemies whose *jihad* seeks to subdue the world’s infidels and to wipe America and its ally Israel from the face of the earth.<sup>60</sup>

The second dogma, according to West, is “aggressive militarism” exemplified by America’s

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58 *Cornel West, Democracy Matters*, 2004, p. 41

59 *DM*, p. 22

60 *DM*, p. 4

war on the Islamic terrorists in Afghanistan and Iraq. “Fashioned out of the cowboy mythology of the American frontier fantasy, the dogma of aggressive militarism is a lone-ranger strategy that employs ‘spare-no-enemies’ tactics.” In other words we are actually *worse* than the religious fanatics who have attacked us, because in West’s fantasy world it is we who are the aggressors and without moral restraint.

The third “dogma” that threatens us is “escalating authoritarianism” by which West means the measures we have adopted to defend ourselves from terrorist attacks at home. “The Patriot Act is but the peak of an iceberg that has widened the scope of...repression...”<sup>61</sup> Our security measures designed to protect us from enemies willing to murder tens of thousands of innocents constitute what West calls “the gangsterization of America.”<sup>62</sup> In other words in the great fight for global justice, we are the criminals and the task of progressive prophets like West is to disarm America to make the

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61 *DM*, p. 6

62 *DM*, p. 8

world safe for others.



As in everything else West writes, there is nothing original in this indictment. It is the crudest boilerplate of the progressive faith. It continues the despicable tradition of American radicalism since World War II which has consistently found America's enemies worthy of sympathy and support, while dedicating itself to crippling America in the face of their attacks. West's indictments in *Democracy Matters* are no different from those issued by his predecessors in the Communist left during America's war with the Soviet empire. Yet, this is the book that the *Boston Globe* refers to as written "in the vein of Socrates".

Because West is a senti-mentalist, his amalgam of religion and politics reveals in stark form the malign method of the progressive attack. Recall his defense of Louis Farrakhan. "I wouldn't call the brother a racist... but a xenophobic spokesperson when it comes to dealing with Jewish humanity – but who in his own way loves black folk deeply, and that love is what we see first." Support for hate in the name of love. The same moral calculus


inspires progressives to embrace Islamic Nazis in the Middle East who in this twisted logic may use methods that are deplorable and may hate Jews beyond reason but “love” Palestinians (even as they incite them to blow themselves up and kill innocents in the process).

In the progressive lexicon, those who are designated “oppressed” – blacks, Palestinians and “people of color” generally – cannot be racists and cannot be murderers and cannot threaten *us*. For we are the blue-eyed devils and we deserve the hate we get. The love progressives have for themselves and their chosen ones is what they *always* see first. Islamic fascists may have attacked innocent Americans on 9/11 but they were really only responding to America’s imperial misdeeds. It is *these* evils that progressives see first, last and only.


Cornel West can be seen on the one hand as a progressive version of the Stepin Fetchit stereotype – absurd in his stumbling efforts to impersonate an intellectual and to wear the mantle of a prophet of social change. But Cornel West is also the archetype of an American radicalism that



has set out to destroy the American experiment, and whose favorite son now occupies the White House as its commander-in-chief.

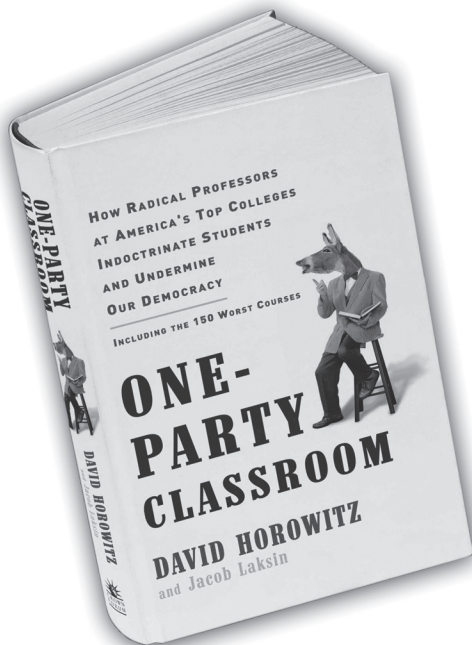


Viewed as a historic force that has conducted a fifty-year assault on America's institutional values and standards, and that has driven America's cultural decline, the progressive left is a movement that masks malice towards its own country as a love for the world's powerless and oppressed. In quest of a mythic "social justice," progressives are the willful adversaries of America's actually existing civilization which by any real world standard is both tolerant and free. The career of Cornel West shows with alarming clarity that the progressive presence is now pervasive in our institutional midst and its destructive enterprise is well advanced.









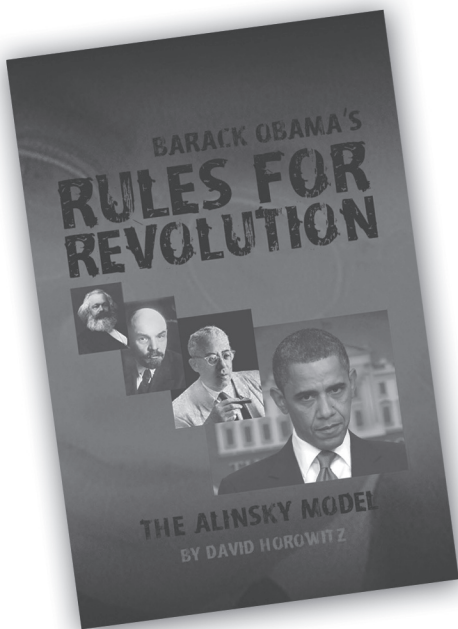
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*“I am a bluesman in the life of the mind;  
I’m a jazzman in the world of ideas”*

- Cornel West

