✍ Book Review ✍

Philosophy Born of Struggle

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A Philosophy of Struggle: The Leonard Harris Reader
Edited by Lee A. McBride III
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A Philosophy of Struggle: The Leonard Harris Reader, is Leonard Harris's long awaited collection of writings, that cover the length of his life's contribution. The title of the book is apt at describing the body of work that Leonard Harris began to shape since the early years following his doctoral degree at age 26 in 1974, from Cornell University. Influenced by Alain Locke – philosopher, educator and one of the founders of the Harlem Renaissance – and Lydia Maria Child – abolitionist, novelist and women's rights activist – Harris was also influenced by David Walker and Angela Davis. After working for a few years Harris soon realised that the kind of philosophy that he was expected to teach was not the philosophy that embraced all of the human experiences in the world. Harris asked questions about human life – the full range of human experiences, including, as he asserts, genocide, slavery, degradation, misery and cognitive dissonance. Harris did not stand idly by as the then philosophy curricula demanded that he teach courses based on the thoughts and ideas of European 'high-caste leisurely men' but broke into the White mythology of Philosophy and exposed its transparent, unnamed, White Supremacy which it shared with the Ku Klux Klan, stripped it of its core, and returned it to its owners. Harris did not want to embrace a set of ideas that stood in stark contrast to what he understood human experiences to be. It did not take long after Harris's doctoral degree and the first few years of his teaching, to

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bond with Lucius Outlaw, Bernard Boxill, Howard McGary, Frank Kirkland, Everett Green and a few noted others, who shared his insights. In 1983, less than 10 years after he obtained his doctoral degree, the first collection, *Philosophy Born of Struggle*, was published, regrettably, many years after my doctoral degree, which I now nonetheless own a copy of. Leonard Harris is one of the founding members of *Philosophy Born of Struggle*, which emerged in 1988 for the first time as an annual conference. I have been reading Leonard Harris's work for more than two decades, and have ensured that students I work with, many of whom are now alumni, have read his work and engaged with his ground-breaking concepts. Lee A. McBride III as the editor of this collection has done an excellent job in introducing readers to the book composed of sixteen chapters that are divided into five parts, each covering a particular subdivision in Harris's work. Lee A. McBride III, himself a noted philosopher, who works in ethics and insurrection, philosophy of race, decolonial philosophy and environmental philosophy, worked with Harris at the University of Purdue, and knows the work of Harris well.

Whilst it is not easy to offer a brief or even broad overview of *A Philosophy of Struggle: The Leonard Harris Reader*, I have chosen a few excerpts that speak directly to what readers can expect within this monumental text.

The opening of the book, as Part One, Chapter One is titled, 'Prolegomenon', which roughly translated means, 'what ones says beforehand'. And what Harris says beforehand, is, 'What, *then*, is "Philosophy Born of Struggle"' *Philosophia nata ex conatu* ... from Latin, which reads as: philosophy born of the endeavour or ... born of the struggle. Here Harris denounces the premise that we often encounter which is concerned with wisdom and reason, which in itself poses questions such as 'whose wisdom?' or 'whose reason or reasoning?' And whilst the latter are intellectual concerns that I enjoy unpeeling, for the present, it is important to know that Harris addresses both the question of philosophy and what philosophy born of struggle means, by situating the human as a universal subject within a complex yet full range of human experiences.

He notes: 'This philosophy, born of struggle, should help people assess their situation and facilitate the mitigation of struggles and misery, the actual experiences of surviving human populations' (page ii).

Part Two, under the subtitle of 'Immiseration and Racism (Oppression as Necro-being)', consists of three chapters: The Concept of Racism, What, Then, Is Racism and Necro-Being.

Harris shows the interconnections between the Necro-being, 'that which makes living a kind of death'. Very much in a Bikoist vein, we understand Harris's determination to excavate the materiality of racism by drawing connections between and among racism, ill-health and death. It is no surprise that some of our key revolutionary thinkers studied to be medical doctors – Ché Guevara, Frantz Fanon and Bantu Stephen Biko, because they understood how the implementation of racism, laying the grounds for the material conditions under which people could be racialised, gave rise to high death rates among the oppressed and downtrodden and determined the physical and mental health of the person upon whom racism was inflicted.

Part Three, 'Honour and Dignity (Reason and Efficacious Agency)', consists of four chapters, that address Autonomy, Emasculation, Empowerment, Tolerance, Reconciliation, Dignity and Subjection. Scholars engaged in debates on democracy and notions of autonomy in the South African context, in particular although not exclusively, will find this section particularly interesting as Harris asks questions about the misery of citizens of democracy. I think here of South Africa, twenty-six years after the first democratic elections, and still stumble when uttering the word democracy. This segment also addresses questions such as honour and dignity and the difficulties Harris observes with the society he lives in not showing respect toward African American men.

In Part Four: 'An Ethics of Insurrection, Or Leaving the Asylum', is composed of three chapters that offer Harris's work on Insurrectionist Ethics. Harris here, in these three chapters, tackles insurrectionist ethics, asking a similar question Albert Memmi asked in *The Coloniser and the Colonised* about verbal protestations and political action. Insurrectionists – people who rise up against authority – are punished within the university context, even by their peers who seem to speak out of many sides of their face when espousing decolonial politics but want a polite, etiquette-filled one that does not hurt the coloniser's feelings, especially if the coloniser has invited them home for a drink. We know that the possibility of revolt in South Africa were placed in the hands of Bishop Tutu whose relationship with God was sought to help him steer the colonised, oppressed and previously enslaved towards a politics of forgiveness. Harris asks questions about the purpose of a philosophy that allows for arguments but does not allow for strategies or motivations for the oppressed to revolt, and claim it as reasonable and just.

Part Five, 'Bridges to Future Traditions', offers five chapters that focus

on community and building the future. 'Universal human liberation is freedom from the very boundaries of the names through which freedom is sought'. Harris offers many insightful and thought-provoking strategies for future traditions. There is not one narrative that Harris puts forward as indicative of what the future might hold but several. I suggest readers engage with all of what these chapters offer.

Given South Africa's interest in decolonisation and decoloniality as an ongoing, interpersonal, psychosocial, educational, wealth and land return and redistribution project, *A Philosophy of Struggle: The Leonard Harris Reader* offers young, emerging and established scholars the possibility to think alongside a philosophy of struggle, one which most will recognise. As someone who has been enormously influenced by Leonard Harris's work, especially since it provided the possibility for my own work called, 'Philosophy Born of Massacres', it was particularly insightful not only to learn of the work of Alain Locke, born in 1885 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, but to learn that when Locke was at Hertford College at the University of Oxford, fellow student and member of the cosmopolitan club, Pixley ka Isaka Seme and he were closely acquainted. After studying at Columbia University in the United States, Pixly ka Isaka Seme entered Oxford in 1906 to study for his law degree. Seventy-seven years earlier in 1871, in the same month as Leonard Harris birth, our very own Charlotte Makgomo Mannya was born in Fort Beaufort in the Eastern Cape. A gifted singer, Charlotte Mannya, upon her marriage and today known as Charlotte Maxeke, travelled with her choir to London, then Canada and the United States. After the choir was abandoned in the United States, the members were assisted through a church scholarship to attend Wilberforce university. It is here where the first Black South African woman to obtain a university degree, Charlotte Mannya Maxeke, did so under the tutorship of Pan-Africanist, W.E.B. du Bois. Not only are there many more connections between Africana philosophy and South African philosophies born of struggle, the work of Bantu Stephen Biko being among them, there are many more that need to be unearthed now that decoloniality is here to stay, whether its disgruntled disavowers like it or not.

A Philosophy of Struggle: The Leonard Harris Reader is a must read for students within philosophy, especially those within the field of philosophy of race, African and Africana philosophy and philosophies of liberation. This long awaited collection is a global phenomenon as Harris has produced a collection that will enrich the lives of all us across the globe who have for many

years followed his work and shared them with others. This is without doubt a monumental read!

I would like to close this review, with the words that Professor Leonard Harris recites when he opens the Philosophy Born of Struggle conference, and when he closes it:

> Let me give you a word of the philosophy of reform. The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims, have been born of earnest struggle .....
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> This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will ....
>
> If we ever get free from the oppressions and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and if needs be, by our lives and the lives of others.
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> (Frederick Douglass 1857. If There Is No Struggle, There Is No Progress.)

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