The central contention of Tunde Adeleke’s *UnAfrican Americans* is that prominent nineteenth century black leaders pursued a nationalism ostensibly in opposition to European nationalism but that was in fact modeled after it. Consequently, the logic of oppressor nationalism underpinned the politics of black nationalism. Black nationalists tacitly accepted the ideology of *mission civilisatrice*, used by whites to legitimate the expansion of European power, subscribing to the Victorian desire to redeem Africans from their moral and cultural poverty. Adeleke finds one of the scholar-leaders in his study, Martin Delany, denigrating traditional African values and cultural practices and glorifying the work of Christian missionaries as they ‘civilized’ Africans. Adeleke also contends that, more than being guided by a genuine devotion to Africa’s development, black American nationalists wanted to be a part of the ‘American dream’. It was only out of frustration with their situation at home that some black intellectuals looked to Africa for options.

Adeleke does a superb job of mapping the eurocentrism of the period. In what is now familiar to us as ‘modernization theory’, Europeans conceived of societal evolution as moving along a unilinear path, with Europeans representing the most advanced and civilized race, and Africans opposite them on the racial continuum. Yet, the world beyond the European horizon was thought to be without history. As an explanation for change, the thesis of ‘diffusionism’ was offered-‘civilized’ nations cultivated ‘backward’ nations. It followed that Africa could develop
only with Europe’s guiding hand. Adeleke demonstrates that this construction, what the late geographer James Blaut described as the ‘colonizer’s model of the world’, was shared by black American nationalists during the period of the intensification of European colonization of Africa. Adeleke attributes this to socialization in a cultural milieu that was dominated by eurocentric assumptions about the cultural and racial ordering of the world. Adeleke finds in black American nationalism a worldview imbued with paternalistic and racist notions of Africans, one that sanctioned European colonization of the African continent.

This is the strength of *UnAfrican Americans*. However, some will find inadequate Adeleke’s explanation for why what was conceptualized as oppressed nationalism became in practice a component of oppressor nationalism. Adeleke argues that the civilizing mission was the ‘underlying rationale for European imperialism’ (p. 59). The basis for the paradox of black American nationalism was its adherence to the eurocentric assumptions in European nationalism and the project to civilize Africa. The pretense of *mission civilisatrice* was not to rationalize economic conquest, Adeleke contends, but rather Delany and other black leaders, like their European counterparts, employed an ‘economic justification of foreign intervention in Africa’ (p. 115). I would put the matter differently—the ‘civilizing mission’ was but one ideological aspect of European colonization, a phenomenon driven primarily by material forces.

I raise the issue of capitalism not merely to engage the book in a debate about the relative weight that should be attributed to economic and cultural forces in historical development. History is, as the French structuralists say, ‘over-determined’. The colonizer’s worldview cannot be reduced to a redemptive guise for economic motives. Indeed, diffusionism appears early in modern European thought (Nicholas Canny finds it in use as far back as the English colonization of Ireland in the sixteenth century). But because of the central place cultural factors are given in
his analysis, Adeleke does not sufficiently acknowledge that the ‘strange alchemy’ (to borrow Jeffrey Reiman’s phrase) that occurred in black American nationalism was in large measure a result of the uncritical loyalty of black leaders to the political economic system from which modern nationalism emerged. An interpretation rooted in a materialist conception of history suggests that the nineteenth century struggle against racism could not escape the paradox Adeleke identifies without black Americans also engaging in class struggle.

Unfortunately, social class, particularly the way it cuts across race, is given short shrift in *UnAfrican Americans*. There are moments where Adeleke broaches class politics, such as in his contention that the dream of a civilized Africa was but a fleeting desire for black American nationalists; their real motivation was to exploit Africa for domestic economic development. Yet, given the structure of his argument, this claim appears to compete with the thesis that black American nationalists shared with their white oppressors the colonizer’s worldview, and that it was this worldview, particularly the mission sensibility, rather than raw pecuniary motive, that drove Europeans to intervene in Africa.

My critique of Adeleke’s thesis is not remote to history. The struggle against racism today in America (and everywhere) must, at some level, be connected to economic struggle. As Melvin Leiman has observed, while a colorblind capitalism may be imaginable, the historical reality is that race is elemental to the capitalist mode of production. Those directions in contemporary black American nationalism that hold as sacrosanct the ideal of the ‘American Dream’ continue to generate the paradox of ‘golden age’ black American nationalism. Other strains of black nationalism avoid this error. Adeleke acknowledges that it would not be until Du Bois and others made eurocentrism an explicit point of struggle that a pan-Africanism could emerge relatively free of the contradictions of the earlier tradition. But he underplays perhaps the
most significant development that contributed to the shift: the adoption of an explicitly anti-capitalist standpoint.

In this fine exploration of the ‘double consciousness’ of the ‘golden age’ of black American nationalism, historian Tunde Adeleke makes an important contribution to the project to correct the monolithic perception of black nationalism as a countercultural movement fundamentally opposed to racial oppression. The author moves beyond the observation that nineteenth century black nationalism was a constellation of competing visions—accommodation, integration, emigration, and separatism—that generated contradictions in thought and practice. *UnAfrican Americans*, through an examination of the biographies and works of influential black scholar-leaders in the 1800s, explores a deep paradox in black American nationalism: an early pan-African vision articulated through a eurocentric worldview.

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