Chapter 4

The Heritage We Renounce
The Utopian Worldview of Afrocentricity*

Introduction

Following in the tradition of contributionism, Afrocentrists are engaged in an effort to correct the errors, omissions, and distortions of Africa and the Africana diasporic experience produced by European/Anglo-American/Eurocentric scholarship. The African-centered perspective has not differed substantially with Carter G. Woodson’s interpretation of the efficacy of Black history and culture. The Afrocentrists have simply replaced the names of Wheatley, Douglass, and Banneker with those of Ptahhotep, Amenemhat, Duauf, Imhotep, and Cheik Anta Diop. They differ with the vindicationist tradition in one respect that is of great importance. Our friends have replaced the racist representation of Africa with a bold, fantastic, and passionate reconstruction of African history which accents the role of African subjectivity. In this respect, they have turned historiography on its head, replacing Eurocentric diffusionist theory with an African-centered one. Africa, instead of Europe, becomes the epicenter of world civilization. Metaphorically speaking, the master narrative has moved from Mt. Olympus to Mt. Kenya!

In this chapter, we explore the African-centered philosophy of history. I argue that Afrocentricity is wedded to an idealist conception of history

that (a) portrays eminent historical figures and personalities such as African kings, emperors, political leaders, and politicians as the makers of history, its chief participants; (b) denies the determining role of classes and class struggle in African and American American history; and (c) African American history is seen as a second-order enterprise vis-à-vis the history of “Kemetic high culture,” which is a first-order enterprise. While I agree with the Afrocentric need to affirm the contribution of African subjects to world history, the Afrocentric (and by extension contributionist) tradition leads to a conceptual narrowness that hinders critical reflection on Africana culture and history.

Philosophy of History in African American Studies

While African American scholars have written scores of historical works, few have ventured down the road to exploring the philosophy of history. African American philosophers Wayman B. McLaughlin and Berkeley Eddins have done groundbreaking work on the philosophy of history. Perhaps, the most prolific Black writer in the area of the history of philosophy was not trained as a professional philosopher, but rather he was a professional historian. Thorpe’s book *The Desertion of Man* provides an illuminating examination of various philosophies of history. To date, Earl Thorpe remains one of the pioneering theorists in the philosophy of Black history.

While there have not been many formal studies of the philosophy of history in AAS, we should not infer that the philosophy of history has been absent from the work of scholars in AAS. All historians implicitly make use of philosophy of history in terms of writing history. In fact, I contend that all work in AAS is implicitly informed by a philosophy of history. As we noted in chapter 1, the philosopher of history addresses an assortment of questions: What is the role of periodization in the writing of history? What is the substance and significance of history? Can history be a science? What is the relationship between social structures and human agency in historical development? Does history have internal mechanisms that govern its direction, that is to say does it possess something tantamount to laws which regulate its movement? What should be the mode and structure of explanation in history? Is it possible to develop objective causal explanations in history? What methodologies are appropriate for studying history? By what standards should historical explanations be judged and compared?

Let’s look, for instance, at periodization, one of the fundamental problems in historiography. Periodization defines the essential content of the stages in the emergence and development of historical processes characteristic of a given