Nihilism and the Roots of Crisis in American Democracy: A Diagnosis of Cornel West

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ABSTRACT

Cornel West's diagnosis of the crisis of the American democracy is the subject matter of this article. Analyzing the condition of the American democracy of the end of XX and the beginning of XXI centuries, C. West focused on the individual, existential character of the crisis. The diagnosed state had according to him much affect not only on political issues, but first and foremost on the spread of nihilism among American citizens. Nihilism – is understood in the C. West as senselessness of life and low self-esteem is the subject matter of this article.

Keywords*: Cornel West, Nihilism, Prophetic Philosophy, American Democracy

The aim of this article is to characterize and analyze the diagnosis of the crisis in American democracy at the beginning of the 21st century made by Cornel West, an American philosopher. I will try to present a recapitulation of C. West's claims, and focus mostly on one of their aspects – the existence of nihilism and its role and impact on the condition of American democracy at the end of the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st century. While analyzing C. West's claims, I will highlight the personal and existential nature of the crisis (with the place nihilism takes in this equation) – together with the political and economic character of the crisis, accounting for the possibility of nihilism existing even on that level. The article will also highlight C. West's claims regarding the differences in nihilism within the Afro-American community and the American society as a whole. A short paragraph on C. West will serve as an introduction to this article.

C. West is a highly acclaimed philosopher, cultural critic and commentator on the experiences of being black in America; a social justice advocate, a man of letters and one of the greatest living American public intellectuals. As such, C. West remains inte-

rested in an array of topics, including race, class divisions, social justice, the history of philosophy, art and aesthetics or challenges of American politics and religious morality. His philosophy is a fascinating combination of the ideas of: radical democracy, prophetic Christianity, existentialism, American pragmatism and progressive Marxism. As an author, C. West wrote, and co-wrote over twenty books, including the 1993 New York Times Best Seller *Race Matters*.

C. West is famous for his criticism of modern political ideologies as well as political and economic solutions implemented in American democracy and capitalist economy. He criticizes those ideologies, which – in his view – pushed the United States not only into economic recession, but also into a state of socio-political depression. Yet, criticizing is not the main purpose behind C. West's writings, as he tries not only to analyze the current situation, but also to present pragmatic and practical solutions, ideas to help restore democratic energies and "heal" the socio-political system. As Rosemary Cowan points out: "West attempts to challenge and unsettle, thus laying the foundations for a major rethinking of America and the American experiment that is concerned with how things ought to be" (Cowan, 2003, p. 5).

The philosophy of C. West draws from four philosophic elements: pragmatism - mostly in its version presented by John Dewey (Johnson, 2003, pp. 14-17); existentialism which C. West got acquainted with when he was just a teenager reading Søren Kierkegaard (West, 1999, p. 20); Marxist social critique and black prophetic Christianity whose theoretical claims closely resemble those of emancipation theologies (Cowan, 2003, pp. 8-16). These four systems of thought reinterpreted and mixed by C. West became the foundations and framework for his critical analysis of the problems, deficiencies and shortcomings of American democracy. The glue, that connects these four elements is the idea of *hope* – not only a philosophical, or even theological concept, but also a disposition toward life essential for C. West, and essential to understand his philosophy. As James Cone rightly points out, "West's idea of hope is derived from African-American religion, especially as expressed in the songs and sermons of Black people" (Cone, 2001, p. 110). Hope, which enables people to find the strength to endure, find energy to keep on working, struggling, fighting – even when confronted with barbarism, nihilism, suffering and the total absurdity of life. Hope is based on the sense of tragic. On the tragic sense of human history, that we acquire by learning the negative and cruel aspects of human history and the nuances of modern world; a sense which blocks us from building idealistic, Manichean versions, visions of the past and the future and create utopian solutions, answers to complex socio-political questions. This is why C. West likes to stress, that he is "not an optimist, but a prisoner of hope" (West, 2005). Still, being based on the sense of tragic, hope maintains one's belief that in the future, our world, our societies can be transformed, changed for the better.

The crisis of American democracy, and the role played by nihilism therein became the subject of C. West's interest first in the 1980s. He was concerned about these issues from the beginning of his scholarly career, but never tackled them head on until the end of the decade and the beginning of the 1990s. This was when these issues became essential to him, and when he analyzed the condition of American democracy not only in the modern times, but also in a historical perspective, which gave him a better angle to diagnose the reasons for this crisis, and enabled him to focus on the existential crisis in one particular group of the American society - Afro-Americans. He first presented his views on the subject in an article *Nihilism in Black America: A Danger that Corrodes from Within* published in 1991, and later included in his famous book, *Race Matters*

(West, 1991; West, 2001). James Cone calls this particular essay "one of his [C. West's – J.J.] most insightful and widely read analyses of the interplay of existential angst and social evil in the Black community" (Yancy, 2001, p. 112).

The fact that C. West was the first to tackle the issue of nihilism in black America does not mean that his observations and findings concern Afro-Americans only, and cannot be applied to the American society as a whole. On the contrary, C. West stressed that the mechanisms he analyzed and characterized affect the rise and spreading of nihilism among black Americans in the same way they affect the American society; the process he examined applies to "America as a whole" (West, 1993/2001, p. IX). I shall now concentrate on characterizing the issue of "nihilism in black America" – its sources, consequences for the society and for the individual, with the possibilities to overcome this "disease of the soul" (this is how West saw nihilism: as a disease similar to alcoholism or drug addiction).

The first point made by C. West regarding the problem of nihilism in black America relates to the starting point for any inquiry made by a scholar. He stresses, that the only way to begin analyzing and debating the reasons behind the nihilistic threat pervading an ever-growing part of American society is to go beyond the popular analysis positions and perspectives, typically associated with liberals and conservatives. The liberals usually find causes for the emergence of nihilism in institutions and social structure, while the conservatives find them in the misbehavior of Afro-Americans. C. West argues, that one needs to understand three fundamental points – so often dismissed by both liberals and conservatives – before one can seriously address the problem of nihilism. First, one has to realize, that "structures and behavior are inseparable, that institution and values go hand in hand" (West, 1993/2001, p. 12), therefore behavior influences and changes the social structure; however, it is also the other way around which is why the popular (yet so often vulgar) understanding of the causes for social problems is superficial and does not touch its true origins.

Second, C. West insists that his readers notice that cultural factors can influence social structures just as much as economic and political ones. Culture is also a form of social structure, and its institutions are families, schools, churches and media. Similarly, economy and politics are not only influenced by certain values and behavior, but both promote values and behavior themselves. Last – but by no means least – dealing with the "monumental eclipse of hope, the unprecedented collapse of meaning, the incredible disregard for human (especially black) life and property in much of black America […]" (West, 1993/2001, p. 12) is a most serious task. One can quote data regarding crime in the ghetto, but that does not mean one understands the gravity of the situation and the scale of existential crisis in black America. And only full understanding can lead to coping with this "nihilistic threat".

How does C. West understand nihilism? Does he follow Friedrich Nietzsche's definitions and ways in which the German philosopher was using this term? No. For C. West nihilism is "a lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most importantly) lovelessness" (West, 1993/2001). To put it bluntly, C. West describes nihilism as „living without hope" (Johnson, 2003, p. 20). Nihilism perceived this way has nothing to do with negation of values, full moral relativism or rejection of authorities. Here nihilism is understood as a disease of the soul, which has grave and freighting consequences in our world. This way of redefining the term nihilism made by C. West is not a new, or an unusual situation. The etymology of the term alone implies ambiguity and a multiplicity of understanding (Kucner, 2001,

pp. 15-17). The term nihilism was used to describe, e.g.: criticized social trends, anti-theistic/atheistic revolutionary attitudes, revaluation of values, knowledge of the total absurdity of human existence (which is how Albert Camus understood nihilism) (Goerdt, Müller-Lauter, 2001, pp. 7-17). The multitude of meanings bestowed upon the term makes C. West's characterization a part of a long history of nihilism and philosophers relations with the term.

After defining, how he understands nihilism, C. West can move on to present his analysis of the causes, which resulted in such serious changes within the Afro-American community. First, he notes that this state of hopelessness and senselessness was not a part of black lives when they (as Africans) were brought (against their will) to the New World; it also remained absent in later times. This nihilistic threat rose in the last fifty years, if not less[1]. This does not imply, though, that the black experiences from the early history of United States had no impact on Afro-Americans and on American society. It simply means that the impact of these experiences was not critical and that the biggest, most important changes happened in the second part of the 20th century.

Analyzing the historical aspect of the Afro-American identity, C. West claims that the history of black people in America could be summed up as a history of struggle against nihilism. Racism, persecution, the denial of equal rights till the end of the 1960s – all these atrocities were sufficient enough to drive black people into despair and strip them of all hope. According to C. West, this did not happen thanks to the important, even priceless role of black institutions – black church and black culture – which never allowed hope to die (C. West identifies music – the music of spirituals, blues and jazz – as the major "protector") and thanks to the role of Afro-American leaders – Frederick Douglas, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., William Edward Burghardt Du Bois among many others.

What then contributed to this sudden rise of the nihilistic threat in black America? C. West focuses on two main factors that he considers most important: the rise of the influence of market culture and market morality and the crisis (or even lack of) African-American leaders[2]. What exactly is market morality and how can market or market culture and market morality affect the lives of black people (and the society as a whole)? C. West points out corporate market institutions, which he defines as „that complex set of interlocking enterprises that have a disproportionate amount of capital, power and exercise a disproportionate influence on how our society is run and how our culture is shaped" (West, 1993/2001, p. 16). These are the institutions promoting market morality and market culture. The corporate institutions are motivated by financial profits and their fundamental strategy to acquire profits is to promote consumption and consumerism. And it is precisely this consumerism that C. West sees as having the most destructive impact on society.

Consumerism as such is not perceived by C. West as „moral evil". What makes it evil is the distortion of values in entails, that is, how consumerism attributes to the rise of nihilism in society. Market institutions promote, glorify and praise pleasure

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[1]   Cornel West is pointing to the Civil Rights Movement (so, to the 1960s) as the starting point for the rise of this nihilistic threat.

[2]   This does not mean, that C. West overlooks the impact of political actions. He stresses that some political decisions and legislation passed by the conservatives in the 1980s contributed to the escalation of the threat of nihilism in Afro-America (West, 1993/2001, pp. 14-15).

(gratification) as the highest, most important value. Pleasure – which rejects learning about the past, planning the future and concentrates solely on gratification in the present – replaces love, care and respect as desirable values. The mass media promotes pleasure by "bombarding" Afro-Americans (just as all Americans) with images of comfort, sexual satisfaction, superficial machismo mostly reduced to physical strength and violence, superficial femininity reduced to aesthetic beauty and subordination. This emphasis on pleasure and consumption (consumerism) results in changing the behavior of middle-class Afro-Americans and, in particular, the underclass. Excessive consumerism, dismissal of so-called „deeper values" and focus on the self rather than the group are extremely visible in the middle class. When we look at the poor, the situation is even worse. Violence, crime, drugs, alcohol are glorified as the fastest or the only available ways to attain material goods and pleasures (this points to "comfort" and "gratification" promoted so extensively by corporate market institutions). This specific "triumph" of pleasure-seeking, individualism and consumerism makes all morally important issues lose their meaning; the struggle towards positive changes, regeneration of the community becomes impossible due to the loss of family bonds (which are not promoted by market culture). „Where there is no vital community to hold up precious ethical and religious ideals, there can be no coming to a moral commitment – only personal accomplishment is applauded" (West, 1993/2001, p. 36).

I would like to digress here to highlight a particular issue with C. West's analysis. West has been attacked and accused of justifying and finding excuses for violence and crimes committed by Afro-Americans, as well as for the family break-ups in black America: for making black people to be not responsible for their own actions. Critics argued that C. West would make the corporate market institutions (and the values they promote) responsible for the actions of black people. Yet, this accusation holds no merit, which can be easily proved, by quoting the very same book in which C. West analyzes the nihilist threat in black America – *Race Matters*: „[m]y aim is not to provide excuses for black behavior or to absolve blacks of personal responsibility. […] We indeed must criticize and condemn immoral acts of black people, but we must also be cognizant of the circumstances into which people are born and under which they live. By overlooking these circumstances [people – J.J.] fall into the trap of blaming black poor people for their predicament" (West, 1993/2001, pp. 56-57). What C. West is trying to present is a new perspective that goes beyond "liberal structuralism" that sees "system" responsible for everything and "conservative behaviorism" that regards Afro-Americans (and every citizen) as responsible for every misbehavior.

The second factor that greatly contributed to the rise of the nihilistic threat is the crisis of Afro-American leadership. West focuses on black leadership, which he understands as "fundamental, because there can be no significant social movement without visionary and analytical leadership by people of courage and integrity" (West, 2008, p. 131). Here, C. West adopts the role of a critic of those black leaders (despite being seen as such by some); their role was to lead black people and be a moral example, but all too often they were pursuing high social status, acceptance of white America and financial security. The reasons for such a situation stem not only from the poor behavior of leaders, since "[q]uality leadership is neither the product of one great individual nor the result of odd historical accidents" (West, 1993/2001, p. 37). C. West points out an extremely important aspect of the issue of leadership, one that applies to any community, to the relations within that community. This is where C. West finds one of the reasons for the crisis in black leadership: „the gross deterioration of

personal, familial, and communal relations among African-Americans. […] Presently, black communities are in shambles, black families are in decline, and black men and women are in conflict (and sometimes combat)" (West, 1993/2001, pp. 36-37). In such conditions it is much harder for a political leader to achieve anything and impact the community. This shows the link between promoting certain values by corporate market institutions and the crisis of black leadership: promoting individualism, consumerism and the dominance of pleasure has a considerable influence on the break-up of social (community) bonds, and relates to the crisis of a lack of real leaders.

While C. West is being extremely critical about Afro-Americans who are supposed to be the leaders of their respective communities, he also acknowledges the existence of many figures trying to exercise this role. He divides political leaders into three basic groups: "race-effacing managerial leaders", "race-identifying protest leaders" and "race-transcending prophetic leaders" (West, 1993/2001, p. 39). Similarly, C. West classifies intellectual leaders of black America as: "race-distancing elitists", "race-embracing rebels" and "race-transcending prophets".

The largest group of both intellectual and political leaders belongs to the first of the three above mentioned types. C. West claims it is constantly growing and provides a characterization of typical leaders from this group. Its representatives do not touch the problems of race, racism and discrimination, trying to fit in and be accepted by the "white society". This tactic is often justifiable, especially in places where Afro-Americans are just a small minority, and only the dismissal of race and racism can lead to attaining an electable political office (or a place at the academy). However, by removing race from their political platform these leaders separate themselves from the realities of Afro-Americans, and lose contact with their problems, which practically makes them cease to be the representatives of their communities. On the other hand, race-identifying protest leaders are too focused on the issues of race and racism, and therefore detach themselves from national issues and problems of public concern; they isolate and marginalize themselves (also distancing themselves from the academy, hence from serious scholarly discourse and from broad access to society). According to C. West, such strategy prevents them from rightly representing and leading the Afro-American society.

C. West considers trace-transcending prophetic leaders as the smallest and at the same time the best group of leaders, or the only "true" leaders. The philosopher mentions only two prophetic leaders active in the 1990s: Harold Washington and Jesse Jackson[3]. There are so few of them because to be a race-transcending prophetic leader one has to show „personal integrity and political savvy, moral vision and prudential judgment, courageous defiance and organizational patience" (West, 1993/2001, p. 40). C. West demands much from Afro-American political leaders, and he is well aware of that fact. However, he claims that one cannot expect less from them, for their qualities should match those of W. E. B. Du Bois' "the talented tenth" (Du Bois, 1996).

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[3]   Harold Washington was the famous, first Afro-American Mayor of Chicago, elected in year 1983 to 1987. He was also elected to U.S. House of Representatives in 1981 year. to 1983 representing the Illinois first district, and also previously served in the Illinois State Senate and the Illinois House of Representatives. Jesse Jackson, a civil rights activist ran for Democratic presidential nomination twice, in years 1984 and 1988. During his presidential run, he famously formed National Rainbow Coalition and Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity), which later was transformed into an organization Rainbow/PUSH concerned with civil rights and social justice.

And one has to remember that C. West is describing attributes of leaders, who could actively stand up to the growing senselessness and nihilism among Afro-Americans. Therefore, his definition of a real Afro-American leader addresses not only political abilities, but also – maybe even mostly – moral virtues. After all, the leader has to be a „race-transcending prophet who criticizes the powers that be (including the black component of the Establishment) and who puts forward a vision of moral regeneration and political insurgency for the purpose of fundamental social change for all who suffer from socially induced misery" (West, 1993/2001, p. 46).

Nearly twenty years after tackling the problems of crisis in black leadership in *Race Matters*, West revisits this issue in another book – *Hope on a Tightrope*. However this time, building on Julia Hare, he makes a slightly different characterization by listing "leading blacks" and "black leaders" (West, 2008, p. 135) separately. Leading blacks are figures having some kind of power that reassures white people; figures that mostly try to reduce white fears and anxieties with their presence and statements. Black leaders, though, „love black people enough to tell them the truth, respect them enough to believe that they can wrestle with the truth, and are willing to sacrifice enough to pay some serious costs" (West, 2008, p. 135). As we can clearly see, black leaders closely resemble race-transcending prophets, and with that C. West maintains his evaluation of the leadership in black America from the early 1990s.

When summarizing his thoughts and analyses in the afterword to the first edition of *Race Matters*, C. West highlighted that Afro-Americans (and Americans) want quick and effective remedies for nihilism and other problems (of both political and economic character), yet so few of them have the patience to "rebuild democracy", which can take even decades (West, 1993/2001, p. 109). After ten years of worrying about this lack of patience, C. West returned to the problem of nihilism, this time looking at it from a national perspective. He did so in his book *Democracy Matters. Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (West, 2004), where he also took up the issue of crisis in American democracy at the beginning of the 21st century. The subject of his analysis was the American society and nation as a whole, not just black America and the Afro-American community, which were his concern in *Race Matters*. Although he changed the perspective and the point of emphasis, his conclusions remained remarkably similar to those expressed while analyzing nihilism ravaging black America. C. West stresses that nihilism not only prevailed, but, what depresses him „is the insidious growth of »deadening nihilism« across political lines, nihilism that has been suffocating the deep democratic energies in America" (West, 2004, p. 26).

While analyzing the condition of American democracy C. West once again brings to readers attention market forces and market morality, which – he claims – "undermines a sense of meaning and larger purpose" (West, 2004, p. 27). The reason for this is the dogma of free market fundamentalism, prevailing and predominant in the United States. The socio-political situation in this regard has not changed in the last ten years. What continues to be promoted by market forces are low values, pleasure that is quick and easy to attain, sex, hedonism and extreme consumerism. This leads to a rise in egoistic attitudes, disregard for social values and aspects, focuses solely on financial success as the only determinant of being successful. To C. West, a life led this way is reminiscent of "sleepwalking from womb to tomb" (West, 2004, p. 27). Market culture „takes care" of the sleepers, so people will never wake up from this dream.

Yet it may seem, that nihilism caused by market morality and market forces is not C. West's main focus. In *Democracy Matters* his main purpose is to analyze the condition of American politics and the relation between politics and society. To put it bluntly,

he analyzes political nihilism, which means that the same disease of the soul ravaging America, which C. West investigated in the early 1990s is still a major threat, it just has a different form at the beginning of the XXIst century. And for C. West, the hallmark of political nihilism is the way public figures (and politics) use citizens' fears and greed to their advantage (and, according to C. West, a great number of Americans get fooled by such practices). Political nihilism makes politicians react only to opinion polls, instead of facing real social and political problems. It makes them choose to preach beautiful lies that appeal to the public, instead of telling the ugly truth and to do politics of backdoor deals, not of public discussions. Where does this type of nihilism come from? It is the other side of yet another type of nihilism, the nihilism of senselessness and hopelessness. It comes from unprincipled abuses of power which lead to "street gangsterization" in the inner cities, which turns into "elite gangsterization" at the top of the power structure. And this "elite gangsterization" – unprincipled abuse of power for egoistic purposes – is what C. West calls political nihilism. A political nihilist „is one who is not simply intoxicated with the exercise of power but also obsessed with stifling any criticism of that exercise of power" (West, 2004, p. 29).

While analyzing political nihilism C. West points out, that this nihilism has different forms and each form is distinctive. He lists three types of political nihilism: "evangelical nihilism", "paternalistic nihilism" and "sentimental nihilism". C. West sees the best definition of the first type on nihilism in Thrasymachus, a character of Plato's *The Republic* (Plato, 2010), who claimed, that it is up to power and the one who holds it to decide what is wrong and what is right. Hence, having power gives one additional privileges. With power in hand, one does not have to abide by the law, because he is the law – this applies also to moral rules. C. West sees the best example of this type of nihilism in the new hawks of the Republican Party, who "seem to believe that America's might actually determines what is right. In this tradition of thinking, we would not be so powerful if we were not right, so our might shows that we are right" (West, 2004, p. 31). Therefore, for C. West hawks are not ideologues, but rather „evangelical nihilists, drunk with power and driven by the grand delusion of American domination of the world" (West, 2004, p. 30).

If so, is the Democratic Party an asylum free of political nihilism? Not at all. When it comes to Democrats, political nihilism simply takes on a different form – paternalistic nihilism. While the character that symbolized evangelical nihilism was Thrasymachus, in the case of paternalistic nihilism that symbolic character is the Great Inquisitor from *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky. The inquisitor is cynical to the bone; even though he is well aware of the atrocities committed by the Spanish inquisition, he still participates. He does so, because he is convinced that he knows what is good for the people better than the people themselves. Moreover, he thinks that the people will not be able to live truly moral lives – to emulate Jesus; hence, only terror and control can "serve" humanity. The society is neither able to act morally, nor to understand the truth, which is why the Great Inquisitor claims that he not only can, but should lie to the people. In his mind, the truth can only harm them (Dostoevsky, 2010).

As C. West sees it, the mistake made by Democrats that turned them into paternalistic nihilists was the belief that real change in a dysfunctional system is impossible; that real representation of one's constituency and the struggle to renew democracy is impossible (West, 2004, pp. 31-33). C. West claims that they got sucked into the corrupted system which impedes (but does not preclude) them to act to renew democracy. This stems from the assumption that the current state of the system is so corrupt that working

to change it from inside is insufficient, if not totally impossible. C. West concludes this evaluation by emphasizing that the Democratic Party lost touch with its base and fundamental goal which should be the struggle against plutocracy. Only bringing back the memory of this mission can improve the actions of Democrats in Congress.

Political nihilism cannot be reduced to a state existing within political parties and the Washington crowd. According to C. West, nihilism penetrated the media world, where it was transformed into a form of sentimental nihilism (West, 2004, pp. 36-37). Sentimental nihilism is extremely closely related to the market culture and market morality, analyzed in the early 1990s C. West's book, *Race Matters* and described in the first part of this article. The similarities can be easily spotted when one compares the way C. West characterizes sentimental nihilists with the way he characterized market culture and market morality (which I analyzed in the earlier part of this article), who are "willing to sidestep or even bludgeon the truth or unpleasant and unpopular facts and stories, in order to provide an emotionally satisfying show. This is the dominance of sentiment over truth telling in order to build up market share" (West, 2004, p. 36). C. West also criticizes media people who censor the truth, limiting and changing their analyses and reports not to offend sponsors, advertisers or the general public.

No one can deny the obvious connection (interdependence) between politics and media (especially media outlets devoted to news like New York Post, CN NBC or Fox News among others). Mass media were supposed to determine the value and strength of American democracy and its well informed citizenry – that is how the Founding Fathers saw their role. Therefore, as C. West points out, ignoring inconvenient truths and facts and changing ones perspective and approach to a certain issue only for financial benefits perverts the whole sense of informing and undermines the purpose of free press. It also makes it extremely hard for the citizens to make rational, informed decisions. When certain media outlets blatantly support a particular political option, particular sets of politics propagating the free market fundamentalism dogma then the democratic processes are being distorted. Here C. West highlights the Founding Fathers opinion regarding the importance of free press and a well-informed citizenry. He states that: "Democracy depends, in large part, on a free and frank press willing to speak painful truths to the public about our society, including the fact of their own complicity in superficiality and simplistic reportage" (West, 2004, p. 39). What he is suggesting here, is that sentimental nihilism poses a tragic threat against democracy manipulating one of democracy's core institutions and distorting truth into popular and market and corporation friendly "news". West uses his signature, suggestive metaphors to describe the way politics and media are subordinate to market mechanisms, market culture and market morality: "[m]arket-obsessed nihilism […] is the Achilles' heel of American democracy that parades as its crown jewel" (West, 2004, pp. 39-40).

According to C. West, nihilism invaded American lives and American society and is having a growing impact on the lives of individuals in the society and on American politics. Hopelessness and senselessness afflicting more and more people in the United States are the main sources of the crisis in American democracy This does not mean though that the solution to this socio-politico-economical problem can be found only in personal changes on the psychological/existential level. C. West sees the existential element as indispensable (yet insufficient) and inseparable from the political and economic aspects; therefore, all possible changes aimed at pushing back nihilism, and resolving the crisis it entails must apply not only to individuals, but at the same time to social and political mechanisms.

The goal of this article was to present C. West's diagnosis of the crisis of the American democracy and its relation to nihilism. The subject matter of this article was the description of how C. West defines nihilism, and the personal, existential character of the crisis of American democracy. C. West understands nihilism as an existential and psychological attitude, as a sense of senselessness, hopelessness and low self-esteem. I presented C. West's claims regarding the causes for nihilism among Afro-Americans and in the American society as a whole.

After publishing *Democracy Matters*, C. West did not end his inquiries into nihilism and the crisis of American democracy. As he stated in his 2008 book *Hope on a Tightrope*, the first decade of the 21st century did not bring any – so desperately needed – changes in the society to push back pervading nihilistic threat. His blunt, yet still intellectually challenging evaluation of the condition of United States in year 2008 is adequately summarized in C. West's critique of the country he is so desperately trying to save from decline: "America 2008 means obscene wealth and inequality, a political system characterized by legalized bribery and normalized corruption, a market-driven culture that tries to turn its citizens into sleepwalkers so they see themselves as consumers instead of citizens. The new American Dream is to never run out of things to buy and sell, and people to buy and sell too" (West, 2008, p. 180).

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