

RD

June 20, 1985

Dear Alan,

It's a long time since we have had a theoretical discussion. No doubt you noticed from this weeks REB minutes that the meeting had assigned Lou to give his sub-report to the Plenum on the Black Dimension and the Caribbean. I underline the word "and" which wasn't only to stress what follows as the new feature, but also to make one realize that we need to stop acting as if each new event -- and recently the new was naturally the Grenada invasion -- is handled outside of the whole Caribbean. I, for example, wanted to talk with you in 1983, when, on the one hand, Cedric Robinson sponsored a speech by me and was not only very friendly, but gave me every impression that he knew as an American Black that anything but smoothness ~~and~~ characterized the relationship between Black America and Black Caribbean. So it wasn't only a question of me and J. as state-capitalists, but, insofar as he was concerned, the West Indian Blacks were, far from solidizing with the American Blacks in their struggles, actually were taking advantage of their supposed greater education to take many jobs that the American Blacks thought they deserved. You can imagine my actual shock when his Black Marxism was published and I found that not only was he playing up CLR as a genius in every possible respect, from literature to history and from politics to dialectics, but he didn't have a single word to say on what was actually going on within the Black movement. I wasn't so surprised because in one respect ~~he~~ understands exactly nothing about dialectics, but in another respect -- and it is the only thing Bessie gave him credit for -- his silence on the one thing that he was always glad to tell everybody, that he was an American Black, and to heck with all those West Indians who thought they were ~~so~~ superior.

Recently, I have been rereading everything by CLR, and the reason I undertook that unpleasant task was the following: supposing I really believe the new Black, Black, Black J. and the whole fifteen years we spent together as a joint tendency was no more than an overnight affair for him. Could I really conclude from his writings that he first woke up to the truth of all his life, and that was the Black Dimension? It then became clear that, by golly, instead of what he had always tauted to us as the point of world revolution being the American proletariat, it was the Black, it was Africa, etc., etc. It just isn't true that that is what he said, now that he is supposedly accepted as the greatest theorist of the Third World. What he is substituting for America is not Africa -- indeed the latest denials he has any African roots -- and even the question of the West Indies, who are that unique people that combined Western Civilization and Black, and they and not Africa, gave the consciousness of Africa to all, but just the Caribbean and of the Caribbean it is Castro and Touissant, these two geniuses as individuals were so absolutely unique that it did not matter that one is 17th century and the other is 20th, to slavery, and between these two there is all sorts of great poetry from Martinique.

Now dear Alan, prey tell me what does this say about Black, Black Americans when even ~~even~~ Stokely is listed as a Caribbean, and Nkrumah and Nyerere, who are Africans are really portrayed because they were allegedly his pupils. And he is.....

You have to leave CLR to me and don't know when I will get ready to draw my balance sheet. But the question of the Caribbean is of the essence

since Khorram and CLR forked tongue man. No wonder both are still in

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as a very nearly an American imperialist, and in general, if it isn't
Coard he is both attacking and defending, he has reduced the whole question
of revolution to random talk between ~~me~~ know-nothings who act as if they
knew everything and therefore need to have no references to either
history or politics or philosophy, and instead take everything for granted
because "daddy" is telling you so. *

Where you come in is the following: I would like you to write a letter
to Lou (and of course a copy to me) where you write of your experiences
both in relationship to Black, whether West Indian or Black Panther, in
Chicago and the Bay Area; where you talk of your trip to Trinidad and
what the ordinary cab man said to you; and finally what you yourself
feel on the question as what is happening among Black intellectuals --
and I will give the Black Scholar credit for being intellectual -- on
what Grenada means for the whole movement before the imperialist invasion
and now. And, please, do not report just what others say but what you
think objectively and subjectively.

After I see what you have expressed on Black and white, we can discuss
whether it should be a column by you, or whether you should express in at
the Plenum, or whether Lou wants to use part of it for his report.
And please do this very soon, surely before Lou gives his preliminary report
to the REB at the time I develop my Perspectives on July 10.

Yours,

Berkeley, Ca
July 3, 1985

Dear Lou:

Now that you and the other comrades are in the process of establishing yourselves in Chicago as the Marxist Humanist philosophical/organizational center, I would like to recall some of the experiences that I had in Chicago when I moved there as a very young Black Marxist toward the end of the 1930s. At that time, in a real sense, I had not moved to Chicago, but to the Black South Side—that city within a city called a Black Metropolis by sociologists and Bronzeville by Black poets.

Of course my coming to Chicago as a member of a small organization that had broken with mainline Trotskyism over the issue of the "French Turn" can in no way measure up to what News and Letters is now doing. Whereas you and the other comrades are fully prepared with a philosophy of revolution that is grounded in a body of Marxist-Humanist philosophical/theoretical work that has taken more than thirty years to develop and has specifically designated Black masses as vanguard—a designation that is an integral to RD's breakthrough on the absolute idea that discovered that the movement from practice was both force and reason, my "Marxism" was of such a scholastic nature that it had little relationship to any subject of revolution, not to mention Blacks. Thus I had nothing to offer in a theoretical sense to the Black movement at that time. In this respect I was hardly different from the Black CPers and WPers and SWPers that were active on the South Side.

When I now look back at that period, I realize that the best thing that happened was that I got to work with and to know Black personalities that would have never appeared in Washington DC.

Toward the end of the 1930s, Black Chicago was exhibiting a new militancy. There were many picket lines protesting discriminatory hiring inside and outside of the South Side. Once I participated in a picket line protesting the lily-white hiring policy of the Johnson and Johnson pharmaceutical company and suddenly found ourselves jeered at and spit upon by the departing white office staff. These protests, on the whole, gained little except when they were conducted inside of the South Side to compel white merchants to employ Black workers. Then too there was the constant guerilla war that Blacks were waging against the infamous racism of the restrictive covenants that confined a growing Black population to certain boundaries determined by landlords, real estate agencies and banks. Restrictive covenants had been imposed upon Blacks by dubious legal methods, violence and the threat of violence; it was instrumental in the creation of the Black ghetto and the Chicago phenomenon of the "kitchenette"—mini apartments made by dividing and re-dividing normal apartments. They were often dank and rat infested. At the same time landlords, both Black and white, were extracting double the amount of rent from the ghetto than whites were paying for comparable housing.

Getting rid of restrictive covenants was a critical issue for the South Side. It was not just fought legally; everyone knew that the Chicago courts were "landlord courts". A number of committees were organized which exposed gonging landlords, the unsanitary housing that they were renting and in particular the number of cases of rat bites that children were suffering.

One of these committees was the "South Side Action Committee". It was a neighborhood committee that I was associated with. Its leading personality was Marie Ellis, a very small Black woman that was relentless in her efforts to find landlords to expose. She once told me that though white;

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landlords were making a profit from Black misery,^{it} was Oscar DePriest who invented the "kitchenette".

Marie Ellis was also associated with William Harper the director of the "Washington Park Forum". The Forum was the focal point of Black radical thought on the South Side. It was unlike the "bughouse" type of forum that operated near the Newberry Library; it was an organized forum with invited speakers and it was very easy to get invited if you wanted to speak on a particular subject. I spoke there many times, so did Goldman, Trotsky's lawyer. A frequent speaker on African history was a young Black graduate student from Northwestern University named Hammurabi. A Dutch author spoke on Toussaint L'Ouverture. But the main orientation of the Forum was to discuss current issues, not just Black issues but National and Internal issues as well. Bill Harper always opened each session of the Forum with a summary of major news events.

Bill Harper was a postal worker and a personal friend of Richard Wright. His political views were radical, but he belonged to no political tendency and went out of his way to not espouse the line of the Communist Party; in fact he had the forte of opening opportunities for the two to three hundred Blacks that would be present during the summer months, to express their criticism of the the Communist Party. Harper was aware that many Blacks who had supported the CP and even joined it when it was vigorously defending the "Scottsboro Boys", were now disenchanted with its policies. This disenchantment was becoming obvious as early as the Popular Front days when the CP began the line of forging a unity on issues with the Cook County Democratic Party machine. At that time, one of the events that Harper managed to bring off was to get David Pointdexter and "Facts & Figures" (I don't remember his real name) who were both South Side CP Black activists to express at the Forum the differences they had with the Communist Party.

Some time in the early 1940s CLR came to the Forum, but he did not speak. I was asked by Grace Lee, who was in the South Side Action Committee not to speak to him or to show any sign of recognition because he wanted to remain incognito.

Parenthetically I would like to say that Raya introduced me to CLR in Washington DC shortly after he had arrived in the US, at the time the American edition of BLACK JACOBIANS came off the press. Raya had originally planned to introduce me to him at a meeting that she had arranged at the old Casino on U street. She had gathered there an impressive group of Black intellectuals- professors from Howard University and Carter G Woodson- but, alas, no CLR. I understood later that he had gone off to confer with Trotsky in Mexico. Being all times that I saw CLR I have never had one discussion with him on the American Black dimension.

I hope that you don't get the idea that the battle against restrictive covenants and the Washington Park Forum was the sole activity of Chicago's Black masses. Even at that time when the Country was in the throes of a major depression Black labor rose dramatically as a force both inside and outside the South Side. The old Black middle class antagonism toward unions were swept aside as the power of Black labor in meat packing and the foundries became a concrete reality. At one time Lewis District 50 set-up a meeting in the Regal Ballroom to explain how the unions were non-racist, the unions were. At this point Black union leadership emerged in the good sense of the word. Among them was Benny Banks, a Black foundry worker who fought both the company and the Stalinist controlled Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers International when they tried to stifle workers' opposition to capitalist production methods during the war.

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Contrary to the belief of those who said that the Depression weakens the will of Blacks to combat racism, instead the depression created the possibility for a new beginning in Black thought and in Black activity. On one hand it swept away (then) the dominant ideology that the road to Black success was capitalism as it was propounded by middle class Black leaders such as Robt. Abbott, Jesse Binga and DePriest, and, on the other hand, it released a new mass energy that set into motion new ideas and activities that came to challenge the authentic realities of American capitalism. Some of the things that came out of it was a renaissance in Black literature that caught the totality of the alienation that Black youth and the Black worker was going through in the American Civilization. Richard Wright caught this better than any of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance. The 30s also inspired the new urban sociology of Horace Cayton and Saint Clair Drake and even Roosevelt College whose birth can be dated from the moment that Black students at the old YMCA Colleged refused to stomach any longer its racism and opted to move out.

When I was in Chicago this spring Dave took me for a ride on the South Side. I am quite sure that Chicago has changed a lot in the last 40 years, but the greatest change that I became aware of was that the ghetto had expanded considerably!

Dear Lou I am not saying that the discovery of a Bigger Thomas at the heart of the American civilization, writing; a new sociology or the founding of a school is the answer to the unfinished American revolution that reveals itself as racism; it just shows that a movement from practice did stimulate the consciousness of people. But no post-Marx Marxist of that period could conceivably make a category out of the self movement and self development of Black masses much less than have caught the vanguard role of the Black movement. Neither was there a understanding of the totality of the movement, its connection with labor, with Africa and the West Indies. If you want to get an idea of the non Stalinist attitude toward Black masses, ~~you should read~~ you should read CLR's recent publication of DISCUSSION WITH TROTSKY and then contrast that with ACOT.

Aside from us there is absolutely no understanding of the dialects of the Black movement in this country and that includes the host of Black intellectuals that are turning out... books on Blacks. I went over to Marcus Bookstore last week, the largest Black book store in the West, and was greeted by a large number of publications on Black culture, sociological analysis of the Black community and personality, two paper backs on Bishop, one a collection of his speeches and the other a biography published by Zed Press, Marables recent Social Democratic thesis on Blacks and CLR's "At the Rendezvous of Victory." You may ask where is our literature? We had literature there for years and ACOT sold very well. When Denby was on tour the old man who was running the store gave Denby a book party, but since his daughter has taken over we are out.

But what I want to say here is that I have found a retreat into culture; this has always been present, but it is more obvious today because culture is presented as the substitute for the transformation of this capitalist society in the same way that the "politicalization" of Black liberation is a substitute of Black mass action. Look at the enclosed review of Black Marxism by Mary Lewis who indicates that there is a contradiction between Marxism and Black Culture.

I don't why Black intellectuals have not attempted to analyze seriously the situation in Grenada during the revolution and after the US intervention. The only serious attempt has come from the West Indians themselves. Dellums held a protest out here, there was a small protest on UC campus, then the issue died. The West Indians, like Spanish speaking Blacks in the Mission District are distinct Black communities that have little

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contact with Black Americans. Years ago, on the East Coast, there was a lot of antagonism between American Blacks and West Indian Blacks. I remember that there was an expression that a "Black Marxist was an over educated, unemployed West Indian." CLR felt some of this antagonism at a meeting of Blacks that had been organized by a Barbadian named Hope. After CLR spoke, a Black man got up and said: " We don't need you West Indian^s telling us what to do".

However our problem is how do we articulate the concrete objective of our age the PHILOSOPHY OF MARXIST HUMANISM in its specific ramification of BLACK MASSES AS VANGUARD. I would like to discuss this with^{at} plenum time.

Yours

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