

MARXISM AND THE NEGRO PROBLEM

A Discussion Article

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The Negro question is a problem that has a political history. Marxism has to deal with it in a Marxist manner. This connotes an extension, development or precise revision of the principles previously established by Marxists on this question. I propose here to state what the approach of Lenin and Trotsky was and to show that that approach was correct. It is necessary to do so in order to understand both the past impending developments in the future.

A. THE NEGRO QUESTION AS A NATIONAL QUESTION

"Properly speaking," proclaimed Debs, "there is no Negro question outside the labor question." (1) This ultra-left phraseology was a Social-Democratic form of escapism from the actualities of the Negro problem both with respect to capitalist society as a whole and within the labor and revolutionary movements in particular.

The Bolsheviks, too, were not without some theoreticians who failed to comprehend the complexities of the national question. Thus Stalin tried to show that national oppression stemmed only from feudal, not bourgeois relations, and hence that "in America national oppression, generally speaking, finds no place." To this Trotsky retorted: "The author completely forgets the Negro, Indian, Immigrant and colonial problems in the United States." (2)

Note that the "Negro, Indian, immigrant and colonial problems" are grouped together as manifestations of national oppression. Trotsky thought that the American Marxists were too easily satisfied with abstract deductions regarding the Negro problem. The Negro, they said, had no national customs, culture or even religion outside of the American culture and religion and hence the Negroes are not a national but a racial minority. If even the Negro is called a racial minority, what difference does it make to the principles on which a Marxist analysis of the Negro question should be based? "Nations," wrote Trotsky, "grow out of the racial material under definite conditions... We do not obligate the Negroes to become a nation; if they are, then that is a question of their consciousness, that is, what they desire and they strive for... In any case, suppression of the Negroes pushes them toward a political and national unity."

Trotsky's approach to the Negro question, his insistence that "an abstract criterion is not decisive in this question" were merely a continuation of Lenin's approach to this question.

I. Marx and Lenin on the National Question

Lenin's Theses on the National and Colonial Question, which was adopted by the Second Congress of the Communist International was essentially a statement of principles. It embraces the Marxist policy on the question of nations and national minorities as well as colonial and "financially dependent and weak nationalities." The Theses single out two nations as illustrative of the type of national oppression that evokes mass movements of resistance. These nations are Ireland and the Negroes in America. This reference to the Negroes as a "nation" generally calls forth superior smirks among American Marxists who have studied the National question in general and the Negro question in particular a good deal less seriously than had Lenin.

- (1) International Socialist Review, Vol. VI, 1903, p. 1113.
(2) History of the Russian Revolution, Vol. III, pp. 52-53.

Those who oppose the principles by which Lenin clearly demarcated the National question from the general question of the proletarian revolution and base their opposition on the fact that Lenin, and after him Trotsky, thought the Negroes were a nation not only fly in the face of the material which exists but seem to be ignorant of the fact that, apart from the Revolutionary War, no section of American history is as familiar to Europeans as the importation of Negroes, their enslavement, and the Civil War. To think that Lenin and Trotsky believed that the American Negroes were a nation in the sense that the Irish were a nation is to accuse them of gross and vulgar ignorance. Does any one assert that Lenin and Trotsky thought the Jews in Poland were a nation? Yet, in his foreword to the Preliminary Theses on the National Question, Lenin included the Polish Jews as an example of the problems to be dealt with under the National Question. (3)

Lenin used the word, "nation", (4) in its broad sense of oppressed and oppressing groups and applied it both to national minorities and colonial majorities. In his very numerous polemics on the National Question, and again in his Theses, Lenin emphasized that concrete historic situations, not abstract considerations, formed the focal point of theory and action on the National question. The decisive thing was that "All national oppression calls forth recognition of the broad message of people." (5) It is insufficient to state that revolutionists would support these movements. It is not only a question of support. It is a question of support and the development of national struggles, not for abstract reasons, but because these struggles must inevitably develop along lines of independent mass activity. As Marxists, we would, naturally, prefer--if we could indulge in such abstractions--that the movements which are grouped under the national question would take a turn towards a shedding of what Trotsky calls the national shell and reveal clearly to the participants the social and class content therein contained. But history, as well as the analysis of the economic basis of what Marxists call the national question, has shown that these questions can be resolved and clarified only in the course of the struggle itself.

Moreover, where the national question is involved, it endangers a differentiation within the proletariat. The proletariat of the oppressed country occupies a subordinate position to the proletariat of oppressing country. This aspect is not peculiar to the United States. In this connection Marx said that as long as the bourgeoisie of one country holds domination over the other, the emancipation of the proletariat in the oppressing country is impossible. In his letter to Siegfried Meyer and Karl Vogt, Marx amplified on this idea thus:

"The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself. He cherishes religious, social and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude is much the same as that of the 'poor whites' to the 'niggers' in the former slave states of the U.S.A.'...It (the antagonism) is the secret of the impotence of the English workingclass despite their organization." (6)

On the basis of a study of this situation, Lenin concluded that revolutionists must apply what has become known as a dualism of propaganda addressed to the proletariat of the oppressor nation and that of the oppressed nation. In his polemic with Pyatukov on the national question, Lenin defended this so-called dualism of propaganda on the that the proletariat in the oppressor nation differs from the proletariat in the oppressed nation "all along the line"; (7)

(3) Cf. Selected Works, Vol. I, p. 231

(4) And so did all other delegates to the C.I. Congress, including the American representatives, John Reed, and L. Fraina. Cf. Second C.I. Congress Stenographic Report, 1921, esp. pp. 121-132 ff; (Russian)

(5) Collected Works, Vol. XIX, p. 248

(6) Selected Works, Vol. 2, pp. 646-647

(7) Collected Works, Vol. XIX, p. 242

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economically, the worker of the oppressor nation more easily becomes part of the labor aristocracy; politically, he participates more fully in the life of the country; and intellectually, he feels superior because he is taught disdain for the laborer of the oppressed nation. The "nations" Lenin referred to in his polemic were the immigrant and native laborers in the United States! Does this or does this not apply to the white and Negro workers in the United States? The smirk on the faces of American Marxists should really change to a furrow of worry for what their attitude really betrays is what Lenin called "petty bourgeois national egoism" for anonymous oppressed. Here, again, Trotsky merely followed in the footsteps of Lenin when he stated that the arguments of the American Marxists revealed a "certain concession to the point of view of American chauvinism."

II. National Egoism and Negro Culture

The problem of national egoism does not, of course, resolve itself merely into the fact that the proletariat of the oppressing nation is taught disdain for the worker of the oppressed nation. National egoism has a firmer basis; an economic foundation. The point of specific political implication in Lenin's Imperialism, is that, owing to the super-profits of imperialism, the bourgeoisie is able to bribe a section of the proletariat of the advanced country and thereby lay the basis of political opportunism. The Negro masses do not constitute so great a mass as the colonial masses but, as we shall see when we analyze the economic roots of the Negro question, in the South in particular the whole caste system is fortified by the differentiation not only in labor but also in petty bourgeois jobs. This makes the subordination of the Negro not only a matter of big capital. It gives a definite economic motivation in the participation in that subordination to other classes and sub-classes of the population.

It is the general success of assimilation in the historic development of a country like the United States that lends credence to the type of ultra-left phrasology behind which lurks national egoism. In Europe the national minorities fought for independence from the larger society (from the Tsarist or Austro-Hungarian Empires). But in the United States the national minorities that came to this country fought for integration within the larger society. They more or less succeeded. It is this which has caused such disorientation in the ranks of the American Marxists on the National Question in America as opposed to their more ready comprehension of it in Europe and Asia.

The exception to the integration is the Negro. Why? Surely, it isn't the Negro's doing; he only wants his assimilation accepted. We see that here is a complex pattern that cannot be solved by abstract criteria as to what constitutes a nation.

Much has been written of the sameness of the Negro and American culture in order to prove that the Negroes are not a nation. But what these writers have failed to show is: why, then, does there nevertheless exist a Negro problem. That is the nub of the matter. The sameness of the Negro and American culture does not explain this. The explanation rather lies in the isolation and attempted exclusion of the Negro from the American culture. The persistence of the divergence and its sharpness is what Lenin and Trotsky saw in their approach to the Negro problem. It is the Negro's special oppression, the deprivation of his political rights, the discrimination against him on the job, Jim Crowism and racial segregation that makes of him a problem. The attempt to gloss over this fact or subordinate it to the general labor problem Trotsky considered a manifestation of, or concession to American chauvinism.

III. Negro Movements

Some of the American Marxists are obsessed with the idea that if the Negro problem be classed as part of the National Question that thereby we will lose sight of the class struggle (8) and thus let the Negro Bourgeoisie dominate the mass movement of Negroes. There is, of course, a theoretical danger that the Negro bourgeoisie would dominate

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the mass movement. That danger exists in every national movement. But in this special case we must not forget that the Negro bourgeoisie is infinitesimal and to call it a compradore bourgeoisie* is merely to prepare the way for serious political errors. A genuine compradore bourgeoisie is the bourgeoisie of India or of China. They have a certain influence and power in the process of production. They are the ones who actually use finance capital. They have a social base which would enable it to overthrow the dominant imperialist power were it not for the fear of the masses. The Negro bourgeoisie has no roots in the process of production itself. It can offer nothing to the Negro masses except hot air on the race question. It is not a compradore bourgeoisie. It is a section of the American petty bourgeoisie. Furthermore, it is the feeblest and most contemptible section of the American petty bourgeoisie. Not only is it restricted to serving Negroes, but even among those who serve Negroes, it is much the smaller and insignificant section, being, for example, far outnumbered and outdistanced by the Jews who live off the same section of the population.

There is a danger also that the Negro movement would be dominated by its petty bourgeois leaders. There is always that kind of danger. But what is the way in which, from the beginning of Marxism to the present day, Marxists have always met this problem? By constantly preaching about the class struggle? Yes, certainly. Marxists always have and always will preach about the class struggle until the complete overthrow of capitalist society. But the whole point of placing the Negro question in the category of the National Question is the following. In order to prevent the domination of the movement against national oppression by the petty bourgeoisie, the Marxists place themselves at the head of this movement. They do so neither with equivocation nor with the air of "how unfortunate it is that we have to waste time on this unfortunate weakness of the masses". No. The only way to defeat the petty bourgeoisie is boldly to proclaim not only the legitimacy but the revolutionary significance of the struggle against national oppression and in our own way to drive the petty bourgeoisie from the leadership. Nowhere is this better expressed than in an article written by Lenin in which he explains how Marx used this method in connection with the agrarian question in the United States. Lenin then applies the same method to the peasant question in Russia. He writes:

"...there is no doubt about the revolutionary and democratic nature of this movement and we must support it with all our might, develop it, make it politically conscious and definitely class movement, push it forward, much hand in hand with it to the end--for we are marching far beyond the end of any peasant movement; we are marching to the very end of the division of society into classes." (9)

These words can be applied to the concrete situation of the masses of the Negroes in the United States. That is what is meant, and that is what Lenin and Trotsky meant when they said the Negro question is part of the National Question.

To say that labor is to fix it all is to say nothing. Labor has to "fix" all problems. The proletariat is the only cohesive revolutionary class in present-day society and no fundamental transformation of the social order can occur except under its leadership. But meanwhile the Negroes are in constant activity and organization (NAACP, Urban League, the Garvey movement) on the basis of the fact that they are a nationally oppressed minority. They work with labor sometimes, and against labor at other times. They cannot be told to wait for the day of the revolution.

(8) Lenin knew these accusations of forgetting the class struggle in the national question very well. Writing on the Irish question, he states that because Marx in the International proposed a resolution of sympathy with the "Irish nation" and the "Irish people" (the clever L VI would probably have rated poor Marx for forgetting about the class struggle!)." --Selected Works, Vol. VI, p. 279

*To call the Negro bourgeoisie a compradore bourgeoisie is to make the Negro Question indeed a national question and not merely by the application of the principles of the national question to an minority group. Lenin and Trotsky never went that far.

(9) Selected Works, Vol. XII, p. 203

The fact that the Negro masses could embrace so utopian a scheme as "Back to Africa"--a utopianism all the more suicidal since their customs, language, and cultures are American--reveals both how frustrated the Negro feels at ever achieving full democratic rights in America and how desperately repressed he feels as a national minority. And, what is more important, they mean to do something about this with or without the help of revolutionists. They flock to him who recognizes that fundamental fact. If the movement develops into reactionary channels, as the Garvey movement most certainly did, and if the revolutionists were unable to make a dent in his ranks, it only proves that the only way to influence masses in motion is by understanding the underlying, deep economic and social causes, by guiding the movement, not by throwing epithets at it. This is precisely what Lenin meant by transferring the Negro question from the general proletarian struggle to the scope of the National question.

It was Trotsky's contention that if we understood the reason for Garvey's mass following, we could have the answer to the Negro problem in America. To this day revolutionists fail to estimate the significance of the movement. They only look at Garvey the faker and not at the mass movement of revolt. A study of the Garvey movement is outside the scope of this article, but it is important to focus attention on how Trotsky meant to apply one of the main lessons he drew from it. Recognizing that the Negro's specific oppression would evoke a broad mass movement, Trotsky stated that, should such a broad mass Negro organization desire to elect its own candidates whom they put up on a capitalist party ticket, the revolutionists could, under certain circumstances, withdraw their own candidates in favor of such a candidate. Such a radical departure from the revolutionary advice for the proletariat in general to vote only for independent working class candidates could have been suggested on only one ground: Trotsky considered the Negro question as part of the National question, as indeed he repeatedly stated. The national and colonial movement is the only instance where revolutionists conditionally support bourgeois party tickets because here, seemingly chauvinism is really the expression of revolt. And revolts of minority groups, Lenin taught us, are not hopeless:

"The dialectic of history is such that small nations, powerless as an independent factor in the struggle against imperialism, play a part as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli which help the real power against imperialism to come to the scene, namely, the socialist proletariat." (10)

Trotsky's theory of the permanent revolution, which analyzes the relation of combined development and the social forces at hand to solve the problems raised by combined development, gives us the broad Marxist theory which must be applied at home as well as abroad. Lenin's Theses on the National-Colonial Question provides us with the concrete link to the solution. It states that it is necessary "to put as the corner-stone in the national question not abstract and not formal principles, but, firstly, an exact estimation of the historically concrete situation, and, primarily the economic situation." (11) We shall proceed to do just that.

B. ECONOMIC ROOTS OF THE NEGRO PROBLEM

"It is doubtful," wrote W. E. B. DuBois in 1935, "if there is another group of 12 million people in the midst of a modern cultured land who are so widely inhibited and mentally confined as the American Negro." (12) Of the thirteen million Negroes now in America, nine and one-half million still live in the South. It is to the Southern economy, therefore, that we shall have to turn. The horrible situation that exists in the South is possible only in a fascist country or in a democratic country where the economic basis is so powerful that it over-rides all other considerations. The cotton plantation in the days of its power drove the Negro down as a slave, and such power as it has today it uses to dominate the Negro in the South and project its influence in the North.

- (10) Collected Works, Vol. III, p. 303
- (11) Selected Works, Vol. I, p. 122
- (12) Black Reconstruction, p. 703

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The greatest victim of the dominance of cotton culture is the Negro. It conditions him as a man apart, as a "chemical" that will not dissolve in the American melting pot. For so archaic a system as cotton culture in so advanced a country as 20th century America can keep from collapsing only through despotic social relations and quasi-totalitarian politics. Any freedom of movement that the Negro might get would topple the whole intricate structure of cotton culture with its semi-feudal relationships which are already much aggravated by the proletarianization of the Negro. Thus the Negro is "conditioned and developed by special economic relations" which pursue him everywhere, in the country and in the city, on the plantation and in industry, South and North. That is the basis of the discriminations that exist in the North. The basis is not in the Negro's color or "stigma" of slavery or "plots" of capitalists. Great problems of this kind are not a result of any plots of capitalists nor even of historic tradition. For the historic tradition to be so persistent it must feed and nourish itself in economic roots deeply imbedded in the community.

Historians who state that the Negro problem is rooted in slavery and stop there fail to see the crux of the question. The "stigma" of slavery could not have persisted so long if the economic remains of slavery had not persisted. The Civil War abolished the institution of slavery, but did not give the land to him who tilled it. Not having got the land, the peasant's fate was inevitable, whether he be white or Negro. Even in Russia, where there was some fraudulent attempt to give the serf the land, it was impossible for the Russian serf to rise above the needs of the backward economy. All the more so in the South where the Negro did not get his "40 acres and a mule". Cotton remaining dominant, semi-feudal relationships were inevitable. The division of labor set up by the cotton economy may not be disturbed. The social relations arising on the basis of the cotton economy remain "less changed than the soil itself on which the cotton is grown". (13) Within the economic remains of slavery lie the economic roots of the Negro Question.

Unfortunately, America is so barren of Marxist economists that here, too, a Russian has produced the most profound study. Lenin, seeking to clarify the socio-economic situation and evolution of Russian agriculture, embarked on a study of New Data on the Laws of Development of Capitalism in Agriculture, which comprised and analysis of Capitalism and Agriculture in the United States. Previous to the writing of this work in 1912, Lenin, in his theses on the agrarian problem, demonstrated that "the contradiction between the whole social development and serfdom ...retards economic development and is a source of oppression, barbarity and of innumerable forms of Oriental despotism in Russian life." (14) And in his study of the American development of capitalism in agriculture (15) Lenin found a "striking similarity between the economic position of the American Negro and that of the former serf of the central agricultural provinces in Russia." The Narodniki, on the other hand, (even as our contemporary analysts) glossed over the feudal survivals. America, they said, was a country that had never known feudalism. It is this statement which served as the basis of Lenin's counter-thesis: "This statement is directly contrary to the facts, for the economic survivals of slavery are not distinguishable in any respect from those of feudalism."

It is true, of course, that America started its course of independence with no feudal vestiges. But it should not be forgotten that with the development of the plantation economy of the South, with the invention of the cotton gin, there was a development and extension of the slave economy. A civil war was as necessary to overcome that economy in America as a bourgeois revolution was necessary to overcome feudalism in Europe. It seems, in fact, that the later the bourgeois revolution against feudalism or slavery takes place the less complete it is due to the higher class differentiation in developed bourgeois society. At a certain stage it becomes impossible for the bourgeoisie to carry out

(13) Deep South, p. 266

(14) Selected Works, Vol I, pp. 160-161

(15) This work, in a somewhat different translation than quoted above, is included in Selected Works, Vol. XII.

this revolution at all. That is the historic foundation of the permanent revolution. It is the lateness of this development in the United States which accounts for the tenacious economic survivals of slavery which still exist in the country and dominate the life of the Negroes.

Lenin points to a glaring example of the survivals of slavery in the superstructure --the appalling state of illiteracy among Negroes in the South --and comments; "One can easily imagine, the aggregate of legal and social relationships corresponding to this disgraceful condition in the field of literacy."

But Lenin does not stop there. He then asks the question which goes straight to the root of the matter; "What, then, is the economic foundation upon which this fine superstructure developed and is maintained?"

His answer is: "It is a foundation typically Russian, the 'real-Russian' system of share-tenancy, viz., share-cropping."

Let us investigate this "real-Russian system" of share-cropping in America. Without such a basis all talk of "stigma" of slavery, "psychology of Jim-Crowism", or "capitalist plots" is not only superficial but serves to discredit the revolutionary movement and leads to reactionary policies.

I. Boss and Black Relationship: "the economic foundation (of the) fine superstructure"

The economic survivals of slavery manifested themselves in the crop lien system instituted at the end of the Civil War and which still exists to this day. The crop lien system turned the South into an immense shop and still holds the tenant and cropper in a vice. The cropper has neither control of the nature of his crop nor of marketing it. The cropper owns nothing but his labor power, and must part with half of the crop for "furnishings". Somehow the rest of the crop seems likewise to go to the merchant upon whom he depends for his every purchase of clothing, food, implements and fertilizer. The cropper is charged exorbitant prices but he must not question the word of the boss who keeps the books and makes the "settlement", at which time the cropper finds himself in debt and thus unable to leave the land. To this day more than one-third of the croppers are one and one-half years behind in debt.

The merchant dictates his very diet--salt pork fat, meal and molasses. Unfortunately, with his pellagra-ridden body resulting from this diet, he must likewise turn to his creditor for the cropper never has any cash for medical treatment. This personal dependence for his piece of pork, stitch of clothing, medical attention, means social subordination and political dependence. Again we must turn to Lenin who found the basis for this subordination to be the backward economy. And "a condition and result of the system of economy was the extremely low and routine state of technique for the land was tilled by small peasants who were crushed by poverty and degraded by personal dependence and ignorance."

To this day the Old South is more characterized by the mule than the tractor. Here it is possible only to indicate the powerful economic basis of Negro oppression in the United States and the degree to which it is woven into the whole capitalistic structure of the country. This bankrupt system of production had for years been feeling the growing chaos of the world market. Under the normal, capitalistic development, the capitalist crisis would have dragged the Negro from his personal subordination and lifted the whole Negro struggle to a far higher plane. The function of the crisis is to weed out all inefficient sections of production and leave the social organism shaken, but technologically on a level superior to that which existed before the crisis.

In the course of a "healthy" capitalist development, the South should have, during the last 25 years, experienced a powerful

* Cf. The Psychology of Jim Crowism, N.I. April, 1944.

** Cf. Capital, Vol. III, p. 297; "How would this conflict be settled and the 'healthy' movement of capitalist production resumed under normal conditions?...under all circumstances the equilibrium is restored by making more or less capital unproductive or destroying it."

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movement towards the disappearance of share cropping and an equally powerful tendency towards larger and larger units of production as well as intensive mechanization--all in the ferocious struggle of the survival of the fittest to capture the shrinking world market. The Negroes would have been uprooted from the primitive "boss and black" relationship into the ranks of an agricultural proletariat, and the economic basis would have been laid for a more or less rapid readjustment of the social structure and political struggles of an advanced character. But the crisis in the world at large and in the country as a whole, combined with the political power of the Southern oligarchy and its satellites resting squarely on the economic subordination of the Negroes, enabled it to squeeze sufficient subsidization out of the capitalist government to maintain the rotting system. Today share cropping can remain by subsidy and subsidy alone and, despite all changes, it is on this that rests the social and legal relationships to which Lenin referred.

The A. A. A. is the worst enemy of the emancipation of the Negroes in the South because it not only checks the development of the country as a whole but maintains the economic system which is the basis of his special political and social enslavement. What the Southern Bloc bellows in Congress may irritate the sensitive ears of the Harvard man in the White House but when he comes down South, they tell him what to do.

When the New Deal came South, "the paternalism of the planter, the dependency of the tenant so meticulously maintained, the stern objections on the part of the landlord to any change in the traditional relationship" (16) made it difficult and in some cases impossible for the government to deal directly with the cropper. The fear of the planters that the cropper be removed from his influence and learn that he is not personally dependent upon him set up well-nigh insurmountable barriers to the cropper's getting any benefit from the A. A. A. The county agent in charge of the A. A. A. payments, for instance, had to make the credit store the point of distribution of A. A. A. checks. The result was that the merchant retained the check either for "unpaid debts" or for "future furnishings" to his tenant. Or the merchant would suggest that the checks be given to him outright. Under the prevailing relationship in the rural South, such a "suggestion" is tantamount to an edict that the Government agent has to obey.

The prevailing relationship which makes such a suggestion a law is known as the "boss and black" relationship, and its economic root is the cotton culture. That is so pervading a relationship that it still holds though cropping is no longer an exclusively Negro occupation. There are in the Old South now 5 1/2 million white tenants to over 2 million Negro tenants, though of the croppers the Negroes still constitute the majority.

"The old boss and black attitude", write the authors of the most concise economic study of cotton culture, "pervades the whole system....The fixed custom of exploitation has carried over to the white tenant." (17)

Share-cropping with its "boss and black" relationship is further proof of the economic remains of slavery. It keeps the Negro chained to the lowest rung of the ladder and creates the Negro Problem. If a white man enters the plantation-tenant set-up, though verbally he be the most violent protagonist of the race issue, he must bow to the inevitable and be subjected to the "boss and black" relationship. Nevertheless the solution of the situation of the white cropper does not involve the application of Lenin's Theses on the National Question any more than did the situation of the serfs of the central agricultural provinces of Russia except in those places where the conditions of race become an outward manifestation of the basic agrarian problem, as religion in Ireland and social culture in India were essentially manifestations of the fundamental agrarian problem.

Although the agrarian question was and still is the basis of the Negro Question, the proletarianization and urbanization of the Negroes have produced other factors, which we shall now consider.

(16) Johnson, Embree and Alexander: The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy, p. 58.

(17) Ibid., p. 10

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II. The Proletarianization and Urbanization of the Negro.

The miners' strike has been by far the most significant strike since the outbreak of the war. The single fact that in many of the Southern mines the majority of the workers are Negroes brings into sharper relief the importance of the proletarianization and unionization of the Negro more than a ton of theses on the subject could. Nevertheless, in considering the proletarianization of the Negroes, we must remember its historic beginnings in the South where to this day the majority remain in agricultural pursuits. That would have been so only because the industrialization that came South was built not on the ruins of slavery but along side its economic remains. This conditions the Negro not only in agriculture but also in industry both in the South and in the North. We will consider, first, the South, then the North.

1. The South

Industrialization in the South, instead of disintegrating the peasantry, i.e., transforming it in its majority into proletarians, and thus creating the traditional home market for bourgeois production, developed so haltingly that the black peasant--and that means the major labor force involved in the major crop, cotton--remained largely untouched. The bourgeoisie decided upon this sacrifice of the home market for the sake of maintenance of the social structure there. (18) By the time textiles came South, the bourgeoisie was very much aware of the real relationships in cotton culture and the explosive force contained in any change of the black peasantry to industry, which would have meant a rush of the Negroes to get away from the plantation. Hence they left intact the black labor supply of the plantations, not in order to have a labor reserve, but in order not to intrude upon the semi-feudal agrarian relations upon which cotton production was based.

Thus the "plot" for the maintenance of "white supremacy" in the South arose from the actual process of cotton production. There was a "gentlemen's agreement" that Southern industry develop under the conditions that it leave untouched the black labor supply of the plantations. Just as cotton labor was at first exclusively a Negro occupation, so textile labor was exclusively a poor white occupation. As late as 1937 only 20,000 of the 250,000 workers in the textile industry were Negroes and practically all of them were employed not in the direct process of production but around the mill. Nevertheless, although the first steps in industrialization--light industry--by passed the Negro, heavy industry did not. The Negro being at the very bottom of the social structure, capitalist society pushes him into the worst paid industries. But for that very reason, as the capitalist economy develops, these industries become more and more important. Thus, from the very fact of what he is in capitalist society, from the very fact of his national oppression, the Negro becomes one of the forces for the overthrow of capitalism. The Negro proletariat has been very strategically placed in industry. By 1907, 39.1% of Southern steel workers were Negroes. In 1920, out of a total of 19, 398 employed in the iron and steel industry, 12,221 or 68.74% were Negroes.

The Negro has been an integral part of labor in heavy industry since the earliest days of Southern industrialization. He was a militant member of whatever unions took root there. At the height of its power, the I.W.W. claimed one million members, 100,000 of whom were Negroes. The most important of the I.W.W. unions among Negroes were precisely in prejudice-ridden South, in the lumber industries in Louisiana and Texas and among the longshoremen and dockworkers in Baltimore, Norfolk and Philadelphia. The Brotherhood of Timber Workers in the lumber camps of Louisiana, Texas and Arkansas had 38,000 members in 1910, 80% of whom were Negroes. In recent years unionization (O.I.O., U.M.W.) has spread through the South and the Negro has become an established part of the trade union movement. Many of these unions have overcome racial barriers to the extent that they have mixed unions.

(18) For a lament about the great loss the sacrifice of the Southern home market means to this day, cf. Report on Economic Conditions of the South, prepared for the President, by the National Emergency Council.

Between the two extremes--textiles which employ no Negroes in the direct process of production, and mines and steel mills in which Negroes are more or less equal in number to whites--there are the so-called strictly "Negro jobs"--saw mills, fertilizer plants, etc. These employ mainly Negroes. They remain unorganized. They are located rurally so that the Negro is as much isolated as a factory worker as if he were a peasant still. It remains a fact that the greater part of "all-Negro jobs" in the South are still in segregated and some-segregated jobs and industries. On the other hand, the contiguity to farms builds up a community of interests so that practically right on the farm we have the factory workers who know of no personal dependence in production ~~in production~~ relations and who bring to their peasant brethren that all-important knowledge in breaking up semi-feudal relations.

The proletarian Negro is not the cowed plantation hand. He is literate and has been disciplined by the factory. He knows the might of a cohesive group, organized by the very process of production. He is and feels himself a potent factor. He is no small minority to his white brethren in industry. The relationship in the most concentrated industrial districts of the South is 58% white to 42% Negro, and in some he forms the majority. For example, of the 23,000 U.M.W. members in the Alabama mine fields, the Negroes number 14,000 or 60%.

Nevertheless, the "boss and black" relationship--that is, the racial relation having its roots in the plantation economy--still pursues him in the city as well as in the country. Wage differentials exist in the factory as in the field. Segregation, Jim Crowism, social discriminations persist. The contradiction between the potency in the process of production and his seeming impotence outside cannot but find a manner of expression. His explosive power in the struggle of the Southern Negro proletarian in the Southern metropolis will have significance in repercussions for the contiguous rural Black Belt. It will strike directly at the heart of the Southern economy and Southern politics and upset as well Northern capitalist interests which have so readily accepted the South's segregation pattern in order to seize surplus value from it. But among the millions suffering on the plantations and among the hundreds of thousands who have won themselves a place in industry, the problem before them is and must continue for a long time to be the emancipation from the national oppression which they feel at every turn. The bourgeoisie has posed the question in this form to draw the most reactionary conclusions. To the problem as posed by the bourgeoisie the proletarian vanguard must beware of merely giving a direct negative or simple negative. Out side the unions and inside, it must pose the emancipation of the Negroes from national oppression not only as a legitimate demand of the Negroes themselves, but as an important contributory factor to the whole struggle against bourgeois society.

So basic a contradiction in so important a section of the economy (as is cotton culture) and one which has such powerful social and political repercussions could not possibly be confined only to the South but is reproduced, and in certain phases far more sharply in the North. Charles S. Johnson, for instance, in his Growing Up in the Black Belt,--points out that the urban Southern Negro is more race conscious than the rural Southern Negro, and that the Negro in the North is more race conscious than the Negro in the South. The full importance of this development we shall grasp when we trace the proletarianization of the Negro in the North.

2. The North

The basic movement of capital in 1917-1919 and the movement of the industrial reserve army of labor bring the Negroes to the North and from the fact that they are Negroes sends them into mass industries. With World War I the Negro becomes an established part of the American labor force, constituting in 1920, 22.7% of labor in building trades, 16.2% in unskilled in steel, 25% of unskilled in meat packing, 31.7% of longshoremen, 69.6% in saw mills. However, so long as basic industries remained unorganized--and they could not but remain unorganized until the unions let down the color bars along with the craft lines--the Negro could not become an integral part of the trade union movement. But with the coming of the C.I.O. we witness the unionization of the Negro on an unprecedented scale.

Nevertheless, in the North too, the proletarianization and trade unionization of the Negro did not raise him to the status of

the white proletariat and did not dissolve his struggle for elementary democratic rights into the general class struggle. First, in the trade unions he must fight as a Negro for his place as a worker. Wage differentials, seniority, upgrading have by no means been abolished. Then, outside of the trade union, he is ghettoized.

Both South and North the Negro has become urbanized as well as proletarianized. While in 1890 the rural Negro population constituted 80.2% of the total Negro population, the percentage of rural Negroes in 1920 dropped to 56.4%. In that year in the South the Negro was urbanized to the extent of 45.9%. In 1916-1924 one and one-half million Negroes left Southern farms.

In Northern cities Negro populations seemed to grow up overnight. Between 1910 and 1920 the Negroes in New York grew from 91,709 to 152,647, an increase of 66.3%. In Chicago the Negro experienced a 148.2% increase and in Detroit a 611.3% increase, from a mere 5,741 in 1910 to 40,838 in 1920. The two great Negro migrations from the South--1916-1919 and 1921-1924--have no parallel in this war, but there has been a significant migration to the Northwest. By 1940, 25.8% of the Negro population lives in the North and Northwest. 90.1% of those are urbanized.

This urbanization is of the utmost importance. The Negro Question becomes, in Marxian terminology, more of the National Question than ever and there is not the slightest doubt that Trotsky's insistence on this question was a result of the knowledge of the inevitable dual development of the social consciousness of the country as a whole and the race consciousness of the Negro. For whereas 20,000 Negroes in Harlem are weak and isolated, hundreds of thousands in Harlem today--16.9% of all Northern Negroes live in New York City--create a tremendous basis for the development of the Negro and his consciousness.

It is the creation of comparatively free proletariat and semi-proletariat of these large urban centers in the North which created the possibility for the development of the powerful Negro press. In this respect, Gunnar Myrdal has correctly pointed out: "The foreign language press is doomed to disappear as immigrants become fully assimilated and are not replenished by new immigration. The Negro press, on the contrary, is bound to become ever stronger as the Negroes are increasingly educated and culturally assimilated but not given entrance to the white world." (19)

A beautiful example of this dual movement and its economic base was given by the Pittsburgh Courier in 1927. A bourgeois newspaper most intensely race conscious and increasingly so, it nevertheless for this very reason led the swing of the more progressive Negroes in the community towards entry into and acceptance of the C. I. O.

It is precisely in the Northern urban centers that the political results inherent in the situation in the South receive their sharpest political expression. Capitalism, in dragging the Negroes from the South, cannot prevent the explosion and revolt of the national oppression which the semi-feudal economic relations in the South not only generate but are able to keep in subjugation. The ghetto-like existence, the social humiliation not only spring historically from the cotton plantation. The cotton plantation exports to the North its workers imbued with the ideology of the South along with the Klan, the Knights of the Camelot, etc. to stimulate, encourage and organize the anti-Negro prejudices of the people of the North, fortified among the workingclass by competition in industry.

We can sum up our study as follows: (1) Neither Lenin nor Trotsky believed the Negro was a nation, and yet they unhesitatingly placed the Negro Question as part of the national question. (2) American Marxists have failed to understand that neither the Negro struggle for assimilation into the national culture nor the European national struggle for independence from the national culture of the oppressing nation invalidate the application of the principles of the Marxist approach to the National Question. (3) Marxists must meet the danger of petty bourgeois misleadership of the Negro movement against national oppression by recognizing not only its validity but its revolutionary character, leading the movement. (4) The roots of the Negro question

lie not in the "plots" of capitalists but in the economic remains of slavery, that is to say, share-cropping. (5) The maintenance of this system by reactionary capitalism not only governs the social and political structure of the South, but spreads its influence throughout the whole country. (6) The urbanization and proletarianization of the Negroes have not basically affected the economic roots of the Negro question. They give the Negroes not only a better basis for joining in the general political struggle. They also sharpen his sense of oppression as a national minority and give him the opportunity to organize and struggle as such a minority with, however, the purpose of integrating himself into the society which still excludes him. This is the dual movement which is basic to an understanding of the Negro question in the United States. (7) To free himself from his oppression, the Negroes will be compelled to struggle against capitalist society which cannot release him. His very oppression makes him potentially one of the bitterest enemies of the existing society, as is evident by his attitude toward the war. However, the unemployment inherent in the social crisis and the past history of the country make the proletariat most vulnerable on the very question of the assimilation of the Negro into its ranks. This will probably be the focal point of the fascist attempts to disrupt the proletariat. The proletariat must respond by recognizing not only the validity but the inevitability of mass Negro movements against Negro oppression and strive to lead this movement and harness its revolutionary potentialities for the struggle against capitalist society. This can only be done along the lines laid down in the Marxist thesis on the National Question.

We have emphasized the powerful national aspects of the Negro question and its roots and ramifications in the economic and social relations of the country as a whole. That is what makes it a National question. As the social crisis develops and the proletariat becomes more and more conscious of its role as the regenerating force in American capitalist society, it will not only of necessity be compelled to shoulder the solution of the Negro question. It cannot at the same time avoid unleashing the aspirations of the Negroes to free themselves from the special oppression to which they are subject.

That the proletariat will ultimately solve this problem we have no doubt. The oppression which the bourgeoisie has so mercilessly placed upon the Negro has not only resulted in placing them in strategic industries but will give their developing class consciousness a hostility to the existing society and a determination to destroy it which must be the counterpart to the history of the Negro people in this country. But for this very reason declining capitalist society aided by the historic traditions of the country will see in the Negro question the focal point of attack in order to disrupt the proletariat. Under these conditions, on the one hand you have the question of seniority, closed shop, etc., and on the other hand you will again pose the Negro problem as a nationally oppressed minority inside the union. With unemployment as the basic question facing capitalist society in the post war period the opportunity for creating dissension in the ranks of the proletariat will be substantially increased. Already the rioting that took place over the country gives unmistakable evidence that the bourgeoisie is aware of its opportunities. It is equally clear that the proletariat is also aware of the dangers. A fundamental point of the Marxist education of the proletarian vanguard must be as clear a grasp as possible of what is meant by the Leninist definition of the Negro question as part of the National question, and the capacity to master the principle of approach and to apply it in the increasing complications which the Negro question will present. The Texas primaries is the start, a small beginning.

---P. FOREST
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