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MARXISM AND THE NEGRO PROBLEM
A Discussion Article by
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(Note: The following article was submitted as pre-convention discussion for publication in the New International. Because of lack of space, it was never published. The Political Committee therefore decided that it should appear in this bulletin. - Editor)

In his article, Negroes and the Labor Movement, in the March, 1946 issue of The New International, Comrade Coolidge asks me to explain what I mean by the Leninist conception of the national question "in connection with the struggle of Negroes in the United States against 'segregation' or any of the rest of their social, political or economic disabilities"; (p. 90, col. 3). He insinuated that my understanding of this Leninist conception is "acceptable to Garveyites" (Ibid).

According to Comrade Coolidge, neither Lenin nor Trotsky "had a very extensive acquaintance with the problem" (p.92, col3) and therefore "for Marxists who have a more extensive acquaintance with the question it is not necessary to know the views of either Lenin or Trotsky". (Ibid) For such Marxists among whom he evidently includes himself as the author of the National Committee Resolution on the Negro question, a discussion cannot be carried on fruitfully, writes Comrade Coolidge, "as a battle of quotations, no matter what the source of the quotations". (Ibid, my emphasis). Here Coolidge reaches the climax to his whole article:

"Lenin and Trotsky are our teachers, but we dishonor them and ourselves by burning incense in their names. Marxism is not a faith once and for all delivered to the saints. Our doctrine and theory were not delivered to Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky on tablets of stone as they communed with some Jehovah on Sinai."

Comrade Coolidge will forgive me if, in order to deal seriously with the Leninist concept of the national question, of which the Negro question is an integral part, I by-pass his religious irreligiosity against quotations since there is no way of elucidating instead of violating, the Marxist past on this question, without "entering a battle of quotations".

1. The Negro Question as a National Question

"Properly speaking", proclaimed Debs, "there is no Negro question outside the labor question". * This ultra-left phraseology

*International Socialist Review, 1903, Vol. VI, p. 1113. Debs was not the first to proclaim such an attitude. Before his time the German Marxists in America evaded the Negro question by stating that they were most "emphatically against both white and black slavery". Marx disassociated himself from these "Marxists" and as General Secy. of the 1st International not only offered critical support to the North in its struggle against the slave South but was active in arousing British labor in this support, though their livelihood depended upon cotton from the South.

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negro problem seen 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." *

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 this make to the basic analysis and the principle along which the Negro questions should be constructed?"

Trotsky considered that the Austrian Social Democracy made an "abstract" distinction between nations and national minorities. He drew a parallel between its abstraction, that national minorities are not nations, and the American Trotskyist conception that because the Negroes were not a nation, therefore the Negro Question did not belong as part of the National Question:

"Nations 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, Internal Bulletin, #12, CIA (O) April, 1933)

And in 1938, after he had become further acquainted with the Negro problem, he added: "I believe that the differences between the East Indies, Poland and the situation of the Negroes in the States, are not so decisive."

The whole crux of the question lies here. He who is overwhelmed by his own extensive knowledge of the Negro question may think that Trotsky's "ignorance" of the Negro question was so profound that he thought the Negroes were a nation like the Polish, and it is this which prompted him to say that the differences between them are "not so decisive". But he who knows that what is involved here is not a lack of "relevant facts" but a method of approach will immediately sense the principle involved: the Leninist concept of the National Question, which includes the Negro Question.

Lenin's Theses on the National and Colonial Question, which was
History of the Russian Revolution, Vol. III, pp.52-3

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 what Lenin called "financially dependant and weak nationalities". The Theses single out two nations as illustrative of the type of national oppression that evoke 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 gooddeal less seriously than had Lenin. Comrade Coolidge points to this place, and asks me whether I consider the Negroes to be a nation. No, I do not, but that is not the question. The issue at stake is the principle by which Lenin clearly demarcated the national question from the general class struggle and the question of the proletarian revolution. To think that Lenin and Trotsky believed that the American Negroes were a nation in the sense that the Irish or Polish were a nation is not merely to accuse them of gross and vulgar ignorance, but it is to fly in the face of the material which exists, as well as 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 and the Civil War.

It is the particular course of development of the nation in a country like the United States that lends historical credence to the type of ultra-left phraseology behind which lurks national egoism. For whereas the national minorities of Europe fought for independence from the larger society (from the Tzarist or Austro-Hungarian Empires) the national minorities that came to this country fought for integration within the larger society. They more or less succeeded. The exception 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 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 lies in the divergence 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.

The contradiction between the aim--integration--and the reality--segregation--cannot but evoke an organized mass expression. The history of immigrant groups in America shows the minority groups that have sought integration into American society organized themselves first politically on a national basis. Lenin saw and understood this road that the mass movement of oppressed groups takes. That is why he included the Negro as part of the National question. Trotsky, knowing that the Negro question is part of the National question, feared that we are not fully aware of the character of these struggles and that therefore events would take us by surprise. That is not just a theoretical but a practical question can be seen in many

recent instances, such as the Detroit and Harlem riots. Neither is the Negro problem a mere labor problem. The most striking example of that is the Texas primaries.

Lenin wasn't playing with words--he was dealing with the actualities of the struggle of persecuted minorities. That is why, though he always fought against the consideration of Jews as a nation, he nevertheless, in his Preliminary Thesis on the National Question * he cited the Jews in Poland as an example of the problems to be dealt with under the National question. In another instance--in a basic article on that question**he referred to the immigrant workers in America as an "oppressed nation". To have to repeat such ABC's as the fact that Lenin used the word, "nation", *** in its broad sense of nation, national minority, colonial majority may have some educational value, but it is education on a very low level.

In his very numerous polemics on the National question, and again in his Theses, Lenin emphasized that concrete historical 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 resistance of the broad masses of people." ****

The N.C. Resolution seems to deem it sufficient merely to state that "The Workers Party will not be indifferent to the militancy of the Negro in his own behalf, neither will it denigrate his heroism." (P.10, Col.2) It is not a question of denigrating the heroism of the Negro. It is a question of recognizing the validity of the movement, and realizing that objectively independent mass movement undermines the capitalist system.

It was Trotsky's contention that if we understood the reason for Garvey's mass following, we would 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

* Cf. Selected Works, Vol.X, p. 231

**A Caricature of Marxism, Collected Works, Vol.XIX

***At the Second Congress of the Communist International, where the Theses on the National Question were discussed, all delegates, including the American representatives, John Reed and L. Fraina, used the word, "nation", "people", "race" interchangeably, because what was at stake was not a word but a concept. (Cf. Stenographic Report of the 2nd CI Congress, pp. 151-2 esp., Russian)

****Collected Works, Vol. XIX,

oppression would evoke a broad mass movement, Trotsky stated that, should such a broad mass Negro organization desire to elect its own candidates when they put up on a capitalist party ticket, the revolutionists must nevertheless withdraw their own candidate in favor of the Negro candidate. Such a radical departure from the revolutionary advice for the proletariat in general to vote only for independent working class candidates would 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 scoring chauvinism is really the expression of revolt.

This is what John Reed, whose concept of the Negro question as an integral part of the proletarian question paralleled our National Committee Resolution on the question, could not understand. Neither did any one else in the Communist movement in the U.S. That is why the Theses remained a dead letter, until two years later when the Fourth Congress once again took the question up. At that Congress, Claude McKay complained that

"The reformist bourgeoisie have been carrying on a battle against discrimination and racial prejudice in America. The Socialists and Communists have fought very shy of it because there is a great element of prejudice among the Socialists and Communists of America." *

A Negro commission was then elected and the CI instructed the Communists to apply the Theses of the Second Congress, adding:

"The Fourth Congress recognizes the necessity of supporting every form of Negro movement which tends to undermine or weaken capitalism or imperialism or to impede its further penetration."**

As we see, there is a continuity of Marxist doctrine on the Negro question, which the NC Resolution is violating. The fact that the framers of these Theses may not have had "extensive" knowledge of the Negro problem should connote the need for an extension, development or precise revision of the previous theories advanced by Marxists on this question. If Comrade Coolidge considers a revision necessary, why doesn't he state so boldly instead of covering himself up with a figleaf of an allegation that neither Lenin nor Trotsky "had an extensive acquaintance with the problem"? Why not boldly state that the basic thesis of Trotsky needs to be revised, instead of claiming to agree "with many of the views expressed by Trotsky on the question" (P.92, Col.3)? In support of these "many" views he agrees with, Comrade Coolidge cites a single quotation from Trotsky. Repetition of that one quotation does not cause it to fructify. Trotsky made the statement in 1922. In 1935 Comrade Shachtman tried to use that statement in support of his contention

* Fourth Congress of the C.I., Abridged Report, p. 260
**Resolutions & Theses of the Fourth Congress, p.86

that the Negro Question is not a national question. Comrade Trotsky then commented:

"I base myself only upon the arguments brought forward by the American comrades. I find them insufficient and consider them a certain concession to the point of view of American chauvinism, which seems to me to be dangerous". (Internal Bulletin, 1933)

Following that discussion Comrade Trotsky further studied the Negro question and finally in 1938 concretized the general statement into a series of practical proposals. From the moment those conversations between Trotsky and Johnson appeared, Coolidge has consistently fought against them. In all fairness to an educational discussion that Comrade Coolidge is so anxious to see conducted, oughtn't Coolidge to have found space somewhere to enlighten comrades on this point?

2. The Class Struggle and the Dual Movement

Comrade Coolidge puts great emphasis on the allegation that I misquote him. At the end of more than a page of the NI, devoted to variations on the theme of misquotations, the charge, concretely, turns out to be that in two instances I capitalized the word "the", which should not have been so capitalized since in one case it was preceded by the word, "consequently", and in the other case, by the phrase, "In view of these considerations". Being aware of the emptiness of the charge, Coolidge hurries to add an "even if":

"Even if F.F. had not garbled the quotation textually, its content would have been distorted by her manner of quoting. Context had no meaning for Forost". (P.90, Col.1)

Now let us look at this context which "had no meaning" for me, though it concerned nothing less than the main strategy of the Workers Party in the struggle for democratic rights for Negroes. I contended: (1) that if our first aim in entering the Negro organization was not so much to fight with them as to create a class rupture between the Negro proletariat and the petty-bourgeois leadership, then that was equivalent to declaring war upon these organizations; (2) that the espousal that the leadership of these Negro organizations be replaced with one "supplied from the trade unions or the Workers Party" (p.90, col. 2) meant, in effect, the elevation of the trade unions to an equal status with the revolutionary Marxist party; and (3) that Comrade Coolidge is betrayed into this false position by the motive which drives him all through the Resolution to wipe away any significance that can be attached to the independent Negro struggles.

Although orally Comrade Coolidge has done so most vociferously, he does not in this article answer the first charge. He denies the second charge, challenging me "to produce the smallest bit of evidence to support her statement" (p.92, col.2). In order to get to the nub of the question, I shall gloss over his "forgetfulness" of the instances I cite to substantiate my charge in the column

and a half devoted to that one point, (p.120) and examine his denial. To prove his point that the NC resolution is well aware of the distinction between a trade union and a Marxist party, he goes into an abstract explanation of the urgent need of a political solution of labor's problems, and then, when returning to the concrete question of the Negro problem and the trade unions, writes; that "the Workers Party is fully conscious of the fact and understands clearly that 'unionization' will not solve the Negro problem any more than 'unionization' will solve the problem of the white worker." (P.90, Col.2, my emphasis, F.F.)

Though Comrade Coolidge formally speaks of a special Negro problem, he in reality does everything to erase the distinction between the labor problem in general and the Negro problem in particular. In the original resolution he wrote: "The difficulties faced by white workers are at bottom identical with those faced by Negro workers and all workers" (p.11, Col.1, my emphasis). If by "bottom" is meant the fact that capitalism is the exploiter of the proletariat as a whole, there needs no ghost from the grave to tell us that. If "at bottom" is an attempt to erase the distinction between the dual oppression of the Negro as a worker and as a Negro, then that, in essence, is no different from the Social-Democratic or Debsian conception that there is no special Negro problem outside of the general labor problem. Coolidge declaims against that, but his whole resolution stems precisely from a similar conception.

Comrade Coolidge vehemently denies my third charge that he has been betrayed into a false position by the motive which forces him to look down upon independent struggles of the Negro masses. He writes that it is not that the Workers Party "disregards any struggle carried on by Negroes" but that the W.P. "directs that struggle into the labor movement (trade union and political)"...since it realizes that the democratic rights the Negroes are struggling for "cannot be acquired outside the general class struggle". (P.91, Col.3)

Is any clearer demonstration needed, I ask, of this motive which drives him to underestimate the value of the independent struggles of the Negro masses and the desire to dissolve those struggles into the general class struggle?

That is why Comrade Coolidge's reference to the dual oppression of the Negro is devoid of any dual movement. Though he says I'm a "million" times correct in saying that the more the Negro is integrated into the trade unions the more he resents his segregation outside, Coolidge asks facetiously: "What is it (the dual movement) over against or parallel to?" (P.90, Col3) Is it or is it not true that the strongest outpost of the N.A.A.U.P. is precisely where the Negro is most unionized: Detroit? At the very time that he joins the trade union, he also joins a Negro organization. In the very place where he is most integrated into organized labor, his exclusion from the democratic rights outside the union "foment" the riot. I quoted from Comrade Johnson's Resolution approvingly that this dual movement is the key to the Marxist analysis of the Negro problem in America. To Coolidge this "Marxist analysis" (The quotation marks are

gratuitously supplied by Comrade Coolidge to denote his sarcasm of what I refer to as the Marxist analysis: Comrade Johnson's Resolution on the Negro Question) is "like the incantations of a primitive Siberian shaman" (P.90, Col.3) because it is not guided by "the relevant facts". "The 'relevant facts', he informs me, are that the riot was an extra-union affair and probably fomented by anti-union elements such as the KKK". (p.91, Col.1)

Now let me ask Comrade Coolidge: Did the KKK also foment the Harlem demonstration? Did the KKK urge the Negroes in Florida to protect their right to ballot with guns in their hands? Did the KKK foment the movement in Tennessee where the Negroes decided not to run when attacked but to defend themselves with shotguns? What is it that so blinds Coolidge to the new element in the Negro demonstrations in the past few years? Why is it that in pointing out that "Detroit is not unique. There have been many riots in the U.S. during the past 25 years similar to the Detroit riot", (p. 91, Col.1) doesn't he see that the suppressed resentment of the Negroes in the South, once it breathed the comparatively free air of the North, burst forth into the Garvey movement? Why doesn't he see that the independent mass movement of the Negroes will again be misled by such fakery as Garvey so long as revolutionists, failing to recognize its objective validity, act as bystanders instead of participants in this movement?

I had written that because he fails to see the objective movement of history Comrade Coolidge falls into a subjectivist approach and because he falls into this subjectivist approach he has only vague phrases about the Negro's revolutionary potentiality while in reality blaming them for their delusion? He complains that this is "quite a strain on one's patience" (P.91, Col 3) proceeds to quote from the Resolution on what "a vast reservoir of potential revolutionary manpower" the Negroes constitute, and asks me where can I cite any instance where the Resolution blames the Negro working class for its delusion. Although many quotations could be found to prove this attitude of blame,* it is not those that are important to the case. Rather it is the manner in which he writes history. I shall cite but one example. Comrade Coolidge writes that after emancipation:

"The Negro masses followed the Northern bourgeois liberals and petty-bourgeois Negro politicians into the Republican party, where they remained until the New Deal Revolt in 1932." (P.8, Col.1, my emphasis, P.F.)

This does not happen to be true, for history records that at the height of the Populist movement when the National Colored Farmers Alliance numbered no less than 1 1/2 million, the Negro masses were in the forefront of the fight in the 1890's to break from both the Republican and Democratic parties and form the Peoples Party. Now

*Cf., for example Coolidge's Resolution, P.10, Col.2: "Already there has been too much indifference on the part of the Negroes in the matter of leading and pushing white workers into action in behalf of the Negroes".

this error is not made because Coolidge is "unacquainted" with the fact it is made because he is unable to see it with eyes glued on the dialectic movement of history. Instead he sees it as a series of "untoward events", culminating in the betrayal of the Negroes and having him "assigned the special function of a labor reserve" for the sake of the benefits to be accrued from conquest of the "Southern market". (P.7, 8) Now, anyone having the slightest acquaintance with the objective, not the subjective, pattern of American history knows that so sharp were the social relations between capital and labor that the Northern bourgeoisie decided upon the sacrifice of the "Southern market" for the sake of maintaining the social structure there, that industrialization of the South was not built upon the ruins of slavery but alongside its economic remains, that in order not to intrude upon the semi-feudal agrarian relations upon which cotton production was based, it left intact the black labor supply of the plantations and used immigrant labor as its labor reserve. It was this by which the Negro was conditioned and developed.

Capitalism, not capitalism in general but American capitalism as it expanded, of necessity sharpened the basic contradictions of the historic environment in which it functions. It is capitalism tied to the cotton plantations. Had industrialization engulfed the South as it had the North, had it disintegrated the black peasantry as capitalism had in Europe when it drove the peasants from the land, had it fully proletarianized the Negro, we would have no special Negro problem, but only a general labor problem.

So archaic a system as cotton culture in so advanced a country as 20th century America can keep from collapsing only through such despotic social relations and totalitarian politics as exists in the South. 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 tremendous industrialization of the Negro both in the North and in the South. It is this which explains the unnatural might of the Southern Senators. It was this which made Trotsky conclude that the Negroes could never achieve their democratic rights under capitalism, that the movement for these rights would undermine capitalism, and that it was therefore up to us not only to see the objective validity of these movements but to stimulate and even initiate these movements. That is why Johnson's Resolution, which is in the true Marxist tradition, satisfied itself not with general phrases about the revolutionary potentiality of the Negroes, but concretely specified:

"The party brings Marxism to the Negroes by emphasizing to them that the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself. It emphasizes to the Negroes that Negro emancipation cannot take place without the vigorous and self-sacrificing struggle of the Negroes themselves. It sharply condemns that distortion of Marxist truth which states or implies that

*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.

the Negroes by their independent struggles cannot get to first base without the leadership of organized labor". (P.17, Col.2)

And again:

"Such is the proletarian composition of the Negro people, so hostile are they to the existing social order because of the social degradation to which it subjects them, that the political organization which knows how to utilize their preoccupation with their democratic rights can find ample ways and means for carrying that socialistic propaganda which must always be the climax of revolutionary effort, particularly in this period". (P.19, Col.1)

It is because Comrade Coolidge does not know how to utilize this preoccupation with democratic rights for the purposes of the coming proletarian revolution that he fears those organizations as an impediment in the way of the social revolution and considers the democratic struggle an "ordeal" instead of a direct part of the struggle for socialism. That is all that is involved in the distinction between the Majority and Minority Resolutions on the Negro Question.

April 23, 1946.