

Race and Revolution

Bryan D. Palmer

Volume 54, 2004

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t54re02>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Palmer, B. D. (2004). Race and Revolution. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 54, 193–222.

Race and Revolution

Bryan D. Palmer

Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class & Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003)

Max Shachtman, *Race & Revolution: A Lost Chapter in American Radicalism* edited and introduced by Christopher Phelps (London and New York: Verso, 2003)

WHAT IS THE STATE of our understanding of the relationship of the race, or “Negro,”¹ question, which much current scholarship rightly poses as a “white” problem, and the politics of United States radicalism and the revolutionary Left in the first third of the 20th century? The question is a complicated one. But it would not be out of place to suggest an irony located in the decade where the reciprocities of race and revolution were perhaps first forged unambiguously.

On the one hand, the 1920s represented a shift in the meaning of the race question in the United States, associated with post-World War I developments that included black mobility and northern industrial migration,² as well as a related effervescence of African American cultural attainment and “race” consciousness.

¹“The Negro Question” would rightly be regarded in our times as anachronistic or worse. But this was the term used on the revolutionary Left in the 1920s and I therefore employ it throughout this essay.

²This was addressed, albeit problematically, and in ways that were opposed by many black communists, in Jay Lovestone, “The Great Negro Migration,” *Workers Monthly* (February 1926), 179-184. The history of the “Great Migration” is addressed in a number of works. See, among them: Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks’ Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-1930* (Urbana and Chicago 1987); Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York 1991); James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners and the Great Migration* (Chicago 1991); Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America’s Underclass from the Civil War to the Present* (New York 1992).

Bryan D. Palmer, “Race and Revolution,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 54 (Fall 2004), 193-221.

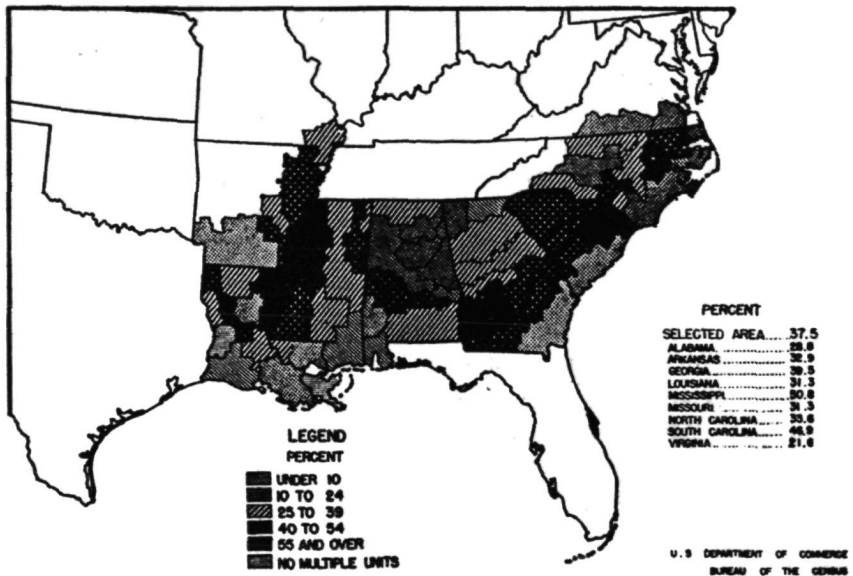
The latter was evident, at the very least, in the Harlem Renaissance, the challenge of the Marcus Garvey movement, and the publication of Alain Locke's 1925 collection, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. A text that rightly achieved canonical status in its assemblage of distinguished black literary figures and sociological writers, among them Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, W.E.B. Dubois, Charles S. Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, Elsie Johnson McDougald, Arna Bontemps, Helen Johnson, Jean Toomer, and Zora Neale Hurston, Locke's book simultaneously announced the presence *and* challenge of a new, northern-based black intelligentsia that had wide-ranging political implications.³

On the other hand, the explosive radicalism of the immediate post-World War I years, culminating in a revolutionary rupture with the rise of communism, is usually not linked closely with race. Indeed, within the revolutionary Left, "the Negro Question" is conventionally depicted as a silence until, in 1928, the Communist International adopted the Black Belt nation thesis, which posited the right of self-determination and self-governance of African Americans in the cotton-producing South, where blacks had historically been concentrated demographically, as well as a general struggle for justice and equality throughout the United States as a whole. A territory whose geographical boundaries were never precisely defined, but which was generally thought to be some 1600 miles long and 300 miles wide, stretching from the Tidewater to East Texas, the Black Belt encompassed roughly 191 contiguous counties and traversed 12 states. It supposedly constituted "an oppressed nation within a nation," homeland to some 5 million African Americans, and potentially an attraction to a further 3 million blacks who lived in regions immediately surrounding the Black Belt.⁴

Chagrined by their failure to make much headway in black recruitment in the 1920s, Communists in Moscow and in the United States looked at the rising movements of black nationalism and adapted to them. Following Joseph Stalin's somewhat mechanical writing on the national question, the Comintern theorist, Otto Kuusinen, a Finn who had no developed knowledge of the American South or the material circumstances of African Americans, drafted the Black Belt nation thesis,

³ Alain Locke, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York 1925); Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York 1971); Edmund David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey* (Madison 1969).

⁴ For early overviews of the 1919-1928 years see Wilson Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party* (Chapel Hill 1951), 16-53; Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York 1960), 315-356. These studies have been superseded by a number of recent treatments, the most thorough of which is Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936* (Jackson 1998). An accessible, albeit uncritical, summary of the Black Belt nation thesis appears in Philip S. Foner and Herbert Shapiro, *American Communism and Black Americans, 1930-1934* (Philadelphia 1991), esp. xi-xxix. See, as well, Earl Browder, C.A. Hathaway, Harry Haywood and the Communist International, *The Communist Position on the Negro Question: Equal Rights for Negroes: Self-Determination for the Black Belt* (New York 1932).



The plantation area in 1945 showing the percentage of total farm land in multiple units. The area shaded for over 40 per cent forms the core of the Black Belt and includes the principal plantation region.

The Black Belt Nation, from Harry Haywood, *Negro Liberation* (New York 1948).

positing “self-determination of the Negroes” as the pivotal plank in a new policy on “the race question”: African Americans were declared “an historically developed community of people with a common language, territory, economic life and an historic tradition reflecting itself in a common culture.” Judged a modern “peasantry,” Black Belt African Americans were rooted in the land and the struggle for self-determination was centrally aimed “at the destruction of the share-cropping system and at the possession of the land by the Negro toilers.” The Communist Party’s leading theoretician of “Negro Liberation” in the early 1930s, Sol Auerbach, who wrote under the Party name James S. Allen, posited a kind of landed syndicalism as the strategic direction of struggle for the realization of self-determination: “This basic contradiction can only be solved in the course of an agrarian revolution in the Black Belt when the Negro farm tenants and poor farmers will dislodge the white landowning class and take possession of the land and the farm stock and tools. With these basic weapons in their hands, they will be able to set up their own government and obtain full liberation.”⁵

⁵See, among many possible sources, *The Revolutionary Movement in the Colonies: Theses Adopted at the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International* (New York 1929); Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the Colonial Question* (New York 1934); “Resolution of the Com-

Conventional wisdom thus posits a separation of race and radicalism in the pivotal decade of the 1920s. This legacy of congruent movements of dissent running in different directions — political, cultural, demographic — can be attributed to many factors, including white radicals' and revolutionaries' blindspots. The Socialist Party of America, for instance, addressed race weakly, and even if the socialist record is scrutinized benignly and specific ugliness not overstated (such as overt segregation and discrimination in the SP in the South and writings such as Kate Richards O'Hare's sexualized racist pamphlet, *'Nigger' Equality*, with its abhorrence of the proximities evident in mills and factories of "nigger bucks" and young, white womanhood), the early 20th century radical record on race is not an easy one to excuse.⁶ At best, it collapsed attention to the particular oppression and heightened exploitation faced by blacks in the United States into the large context of an economic, class-ordered struggle for proletarian advance. This ended up slighting the significance of African Americans in the politics of anti-capitalist mobilization and understating the necessity of campaigning for democratic entitlements for peoples of colour.

A leading black socialist, Harlem's Hubert Harrison, noted that the Socialist Party's need to champion the cause of black Americans was a crucial test of its sincerity. Unfortunately, the SP never rose to the occasion. Harrison would soon counter the traditional socialist cry of "class first" with a rejoinder that placed the accent on the need for "race consciousness" and practical struggle for racial equality. Taking his exit from the Socialist Party in 1914, Harrison founded a Radical Forum in Harlem, taught in the anarchist-influenced Modern School Movement of the martyred Spanish educator, Francisco Ferrer, advocated armed self-defence for blacks, and worked briefly in the cause of trade unionism with the American Federation of Labor. An opponent of war, an advocate of birth control, and widely read in the classics of revolutionary thought, Harrison was first and foremost a radical proponent of addressing the "race question" frontally. This reverberated throughout a number of publications and movements that Harrison either spearheaded, edited, or

munist International on the Negro Question in the United States," *The Communist Position on the Negro Question* (New York 1930); *The Communist International Between the Fifth and the Sixth World Congresses, 1924-1928* (London 1928), 347-348; James S. Allen, *Negro Liberation* (New York 1932), quote on land from 24. The passage on agricultural revolution and seizing land as a key to self-determination is in Allen, *The American Negro* (New York 1932), 30.

⁶Older accounts of the failure of the Socialist Party to deal forcefully with race include Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement, 1897-1912* (New York 1952), 130-134; David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America* (New York 1955), 50-53; Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker* (New York 1931), 402-414. More recent statements include James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925* (New York 1967), 63-74; Sally M. Miller, "The Socialist Party and the Negro," *Journal of Negro History*, 56 (July 1971), 220-229; David Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (New York and London 1994), 143-144.

influenced, including journals of the 1917-1924 years like *The Voice*, *New Negro*, *Negro World*, and *The Voice of the Negro*, as well as organizations such as the Liberty League, the 1918 Liberty Congress, and the most radical, if short-lived, phase of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association [UNIA], which issued an important "Declaration of the Negro Peoples of the World" in 1920.⁷ Well acquainted with the small contingent of black revolutionaries who made their way from Cyril V. Briggs' West Indian-dominated African Blood Brotherhood [ABB] into the Workers' Party (this included Harry Haywood, Otto Hall, Otto Huiswoud, Richard B. Moore, and Lovett Fort-Whiteman), Harrison nevertheless did not join this group in making common cause with the emerging American affiliate of the Communist International. No doubt he thought the nascent communist movement trapped in an older radical inability to confront a white "race problem," a point made forcefully in Claude McKay's interventions at the Comintern's Fourth Congress meetings in 1922, where the "Negro Question" was discussed at length. Claiming that socialists and communists were not immune from racial prejudice, McKay called for convening a revolutionary Negro Congress. More critically, he argued politely that American revolutionaries would nevertheless have to first "emancipate themselves from the ideas they entertained towards the negroes before they can be able to reach the negroes with any kind of radical propaganda."⁸

But the failures of the radical movement of this era were not only coloured white. Black radicals, especially W.E.B. Dubois and others who gravitated to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), led by the white liberal, Joel Springarn, often found themselves locked in awkward compromises. Dubois's early articulation of the pivotal place of the "talented tenth" in the resolution of "the Negro problem" more than hinted at an elitism that many rejected. His statement that, "The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men,"⁹ was anathema to a number of blacks on the Left. With Dubois and Springarn leaning in the direction of a World War I patriotism that cautioned little rocking of the class and race boats of the time, some African Americans who championed a Left critique of imperialism distanced themselves from an older

⁷Jeffrey B. Perry, ed., *A Hubert Harrison Reader* (Middletown 2001), 4-30.

⁸McKay is quoted in Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* ((New York 1960), 327. Among the recent useful studies of early communism, the recruitment of blacks and addressing of the "Negro Question," see Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict, 1919-1990* (East Lansing, Michigan 1995), 12-28; Solomon, *The Cry was Unity*, 3-51; Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in the Early Twentieth Century* (London and New York 1998), 122-184; Oscar Berland, "The Emergence of the Communist Perspective on the 'Negro Question' in America, 1919-1931," *Science & Society*, 63 (Winter 1999-2000), 411-432, and 64 (Summer 2000), 194-217.

⁹Booker T. Washington, W.E. Burghardt Dubois, et al., ed., *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-Day* (New York 1903), 33.

black radicalism and championed a "New Negro" movement. It would soon find itself twisting arms with both Garveyism's black nationalism and early communism's clarion call for revolution. By 1919 the fallout was evident. Dubois was pilloried in the pages of a major voice of black radicalism, *The Messenger*: "Dubois's conception of politics is strictly opportunist. Within the last six years he has been Democrat, Socialist, and Republican.... He opposes unionism instead of opposing a prejudiced union. He must make way for the new radicalism of the new Negroes."¹⁰

This complex mix of race and revolution was of course complicated further over the course of the next decade by the Stalinization of the Communist International and the Workers (Communist) Party of America.¹¹ That this occurred as United States revolutionaries struggled to grapple with the "race question," this process reaching its apogee in 1928-1929 with the almost simultaneous drafting of the Black Belt nation thesis and the expulsion and/or domestication of so many critical leaders of the early American communist movement (James P. Cannon, Jay Lovestone, William Z. Foster), has made the political and scholarly exploration of the reciprocities of race and revolution in the 1920s difficult indeed. For how race was reconsidered within the communist movement in the 1920s, and how the Black Belt nation thesis was developed and implemented, is not separable from the factionalism, Comintern bureaucratism, and Stalinist reversal of programmatic direction that was central to the experience of revolutionary communism in the United States and the world in the 1924-1928 years. Indeed, in this period race would be something of a factional preserve in the Workers (Communist) Party, an almost wholly owned subsidiary of the C.E. Ruthenberg-Jay Lovestone-John Pepper-Robert Minor leadership contingent.¹²

The association of the Black Belt nation thesis with a *genuine* revolutionary commitment to African American liberation, and its seemingly inevitable embrace of black nationalism, is something of a cornerstone of contemporary Left historiography. In the words of Paul Buhle, "the Communists proceeded to establish enor-

¹⁰Perry, ed., *Harrison Reader*, 20-21; critique of Dubois quoted in Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: From its Origins to the Present* (New York 1967), 41. On World War I see Emmett J. Scott, *Scott's Official History of the American Negro in the World War* (No place indicated 1919).

¹¹For a recent statement on Stalinism's significance in the 1920s see Bryan D. Palmer, "Re-thinking the Historiography of United States Communism," *American Communist History*, 2 (December 2003), 139-173.

¹²I address this directly in a forthcoming study: Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left: Labor Radicalism and the Uneasy Formative Years of United States Communism, 1890-1928* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), chapter viii. More angular is the statement in Harvey Klehr and William Thompson, "Self-Determination in the Black Belt: Origins of a Communist Policy," *Labor History*, 30 (Summer 1989), 354-365.

mously important principles for the entire left. The Sixth Comintern Congress in 1928 introduced a new responsibility for Americans to support Black nationalism."¹³ There is some validity to parts of this view, in as much as the Comintern-influenced programmatic support of African American self-determination necessarily demanded engagement with the special oppression of blacks and put race on the radical agenda in the United States in a way that had not been done before. But in placing undue emphasis on the 1928 self-determination thesis there is a danger of understating other communist initiatives in the 1920s¹⁴ and overplaying what was undoubtedly a highly problematic theoretical and practical direction taken for the first time with the articulation of the Black Belt nation thesis. For in actuality, the notion that African Americans in the Deep South could form a distinct nation not only compromised severely Marxist understandings of historical materialism and "the national question," but also flew directly in the face of black aspiration, undermined the very racialized class solidarities that communist organizers repeatedly promoted as the critical component of progressive politics in both the North and the South, and retreated from significant unities that were developing across the United States, especially in northern cities such as Chicago and New York.

Was the Black Belt a colony or not? What role did the landed masses play in this national struggle, and were their interests different from those of the industrial proletariat? Was there not a problem in designating the South a semi-feudal enclave of *agrarian* relations of production, and the North a bastion of industrialism? How did the national struggle for self-determination intersect with the activities of the black bourgeoisie or the emerging African American intelligentsia? What were the territorial, linguistic, and cultural distinctions that separated the Black Belt nation from other regional enclaves within the United States? Would the struggle for justice and equality in non-Black Belt nation areas of the United States take the same form as those in the Deep South, and what did this entail for proponents of self-determination? Where did the white working class fit in the struggle for African American self-determination in the Black Belt? Did Southern blacks have ei-

¹³Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the USA: From 1870 to the Present Day* (London and New York 1987), 139. More subtle is the brief statement in Michael Goldfield, "Recent Historiography of the Communist Party, USA," in Mike Davis, Fred Pfeil, and Michael Sprinker, eds., *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook*, Volume 1 (New York 1985), 328-330.

¹⁴For brief but invaluable statements on the ways in which the Workers' Party struggled to transcend the legacy of SP abstentionism around "the Negro Question," in particular the formation of the American Negro Labor Congress in 1925, see James P. Cannon and the *Early Years of American Communism: Selected Writings and Speeches, 1920-1928* (New York 1992), 42-49; Solomon, *Cry Was Unity*, 52-67; Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds*, 29-42; Robert Minor, "The First Negro Workers' Congress," *Workers Monthly* (December 1925), 68-73; Lovett Fort-Whiteman, "American Negro Labor Congress," *International Press Correspondence* (27 August 1925), 983; Earl R. Browder, "A Negro Labor Organizer," *Workers Monthly* (May 1925), 294.

ther a tradition of historical nationhood or a memory of it elsewhere? These and other questions abounded. Confusion, contradiction, and obfuscation resulted. Communists skirted the dilemmas posed by the Black Belt nation thesis by collapsing into one another the rhetoric and slogan of self-determination and the active struggle for equality. These realms were routinely constructed as integral to one another when, of course, they were not: the possibilities of a multiracial class militancy, such as was exhibited in Bogalusa, Louisiana in December 1919, when three white unionists lost their lives defending a black labour organizer from company vigilantes, had only the most strained integral connection to the issue of national self-determination.¹⁵ The endorsement of the Black Belt nation thesis was thus an ideological project that seriously undermined the programmatic integrity of the revolutionary Left at the same time that it appealed to those for whom an unambiguous declaration of the centrality of the race question was the only way to convince the black masses that a white, Marxist party was serious about confronting racism.¹⁶

This was paralleled somewhat by the slightly later 1931 show trial of a Harlem Finnish janitor, August Yokinen. Yokinen failed to come to the aid of three black communists who had secured entry to a dance at the Finnish Workers' Educational Club. The African Americans then faced ostracization, racist taunts, and worse; the janitor himself later made insulting anti-black statements in "explanation" of his complicity in the sordid episode. The Finnish communist was willing to acknowledge his errors, and to make amends. It was not enough. As an example of white chauvinism, Yokinen was subjected to charges that he had been "guilty of permitting lynch law." The Communist "District Attorney," Clarence Hathaway, who had less than three years earlier played a key role in "prosecuting" the expelled Left Oppositionists, James P. Cannon, Max Shachtman, and Martin Abern, led the charge against Yokinen's "failing to jump at the throats of those who would eject the Negro comrades." The trial, the verdict being a foregone conclusion, was heralded in Harlem as an event not to miss, and took place before a jury of 14 hand-picked working-class communists and a packed, standing-room-only New Harlem Casino audience of 2000. Found guilty, Yokinen was expelled from the Communist Party and required to serve a probationary period of active involvement in anti-racist and

¹⁵See Tom Johnson, "Slogan of Self-Determination," *Daily Worker*, 29 May 1930, reprinted in *American Communism and Black Americans*, 14-16. Note the extremely skeptical comment on the Black Belt nation thesis in Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History (1919-1957)* (Boston 1957), 204-209.

¹⁶For a benign view of this formulation, see Gerald Horne, "The Red and the Black: The Communist Party and African-Americans in Historical Perspective," in Michael E. Brown, et al., eds., *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Radicalism* (New York 1993), 199-237, which concedes that the accent on self-determination was not an asset to the Party, but was understandable in spite of the flaws of the Black Belt nation thesis, for "the party was probably unparalleled in fighting racism...." (207)

class struggle work before he would be readmitted. A day after his much publicized trial, Yokinen, who had been in the United States thirteen years but like many immigrant workers had never taken out official citizenship papers, was arrested and subjected to Immigration Department hearings. He was eventually deported to Finland, where his reception as a known communist could not have been welcoming.¹⁷

Undoubtedly guilty of chauvinism, Yokinen's prosecution was indeed a Communist Party declaration that it would tolerate no racist practice in its midst. It helped to establish that communists were prepared to defend black interests. Yet it was also troubling in its willingness to turn the struggle against racism toward a highly vulnerable immigrant Party member; the atmosphere at the trial was no doubt serious, but it also contained something of the bread-and-circus "hoopla" of a staged spectacle. Banners hung from the rafters and Party workers hawked buttons, magazines, and newspapers in the aisles. It would not be long before the show trial would be recognized as a more odious part of the Stalinist arsenal of generalized repression, directed against almost the entirety of the Old Bolshevik leadership within the Soviet Union.¹⁸ In the United States, as Richard Wright would come to appreciate sadly, political courts would soon be used to try African American comrades who were dissidents (black nationalism in the late 1930s was no longer so much in vogue, and the Party would drop the slogan of self-determination from its electoral programs of 1936 and 1938), their purpose to extend the reach of coercive discipline.¹⁹

The Yokinen trial, then, like the Black Belt nation thesis, was momentarily useful in the realm of public relations, where a Stalinized Communist Party pushed a lowest common denominator designation of the race question as pivotal in the United States class struggle. But this positioning, however significantly it regis-

¹⁷The Yokinen trial was further showcased in a famous communist pamphlet, *Race Hatred on Trial* (New York 1931). The case, and other less celebrated, variants, are documented in *American Communism and American Blacks*, 147-199, while commentary of different kinds is presented in Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago 1978), 353-358; Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: From Its Origins to the Present* (New York 1967), 144-146; Howe and Coser, *American Communist Party*, 209-211; Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Great Depression* (Urbana and Chicago 1983), 47-51.

¹⁸See, as an introduction, Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill 1987), 128-163; Max Shachtman, *Behind the Moscow Trial: The Greatest Frameup in History* (New York 1936); John Dewey, et al., *Not Guilty: Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Charges Made Against Leon Trotsky in the Moscow Trials* (New York 1938).

¹⁹See Wright's commentary in Richard Crossman, ed., *The God That Failed* (New York 1965), 128-142; Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London 1983), 424-425. On the disappearance of Black Belt self-determination from Party election campaign platforms in the later 1930s see Home, "The Red and the Black," 205.

tered among sectors of the black and white masses, would have no longstanding coherence, could be jettisoned as Stalinist programmatic direction turned in the changed climate of the later 1930s, and was aimed at a constituency that was purposively being placated rather than advanced in its consciousness of oppression and exploitation.

Small wonder, then, that the Black Belt nation thesis registered so little actual endorsement among African Americans. It was forcefully opposed by almost all of the original African Blood Brotherhood recruits to communism, save for Harry Haywood, who, while at first skeptical, remained a lifelong advocate after the Comintern designated him the official spokesman of the thesis in the United States.²⁰ The Black Belt nation thesis obviously proved a hard sell, even to communists used to at least paying lip service to Party orthodoxy. In Kansas comrades were chastised for omitting the slogan of "Self-Determination of the Black Belt" from their 1931 election program; William Weinstone complained in a February 1930 issue of *Communist International* that there was opportunist resistance to promoting black self-determination and communists were all too often remiss in taking up the Black Belt nation thesis with sufficient enthusiasm. A Party figure as central as Auerbach/James Allen later recalled that communists "placed little emphasis in ... agitation on the goal of Black self-determination.... Not a word was said about self-determination in the credo of *The Southern Worker*." Outside the revolutionary ranks it was little different. Among Southern sharecroppers with whom Allen worked closely, the Black Belt nation thesis evoked "hardly any response.... The croppers were mostly concerned with how they were going to get through the winter."²¹ There is almost no evidence that blacks outside the Workers (Communist) Party were attracted to self-determination, and few, if any, concrete struggles ever developed around its implementation. By the late 1940s, at which point the Communist Party had watered down its advocacy of self-determination and shifted class gears to proclaim the "Negro industrial working class" as leading an alliance that now included the agricultural masses of the Black Belt, Harry

²⁰ On African Blood Brotherhood opposition of Briggs and Huiswoud see Robert A. Hill, "Racial and Radical: Cyril V. Briggs, the *Crusader* Magazine, and the African Blood Brotherhood, 1918-1922," introduction to the reprint edition of the *Crusader* (New York 1987), xxvi; Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 140-143; Huiswoud, "World Aspects of the Negro Question," *The Communist* (February 1930), 132-147. Harry Haywood, a Lenin School graduate in the late 1920s years of ascendant Stalinism, was won over to the Black Belt nation thesis in Moscow. For his strong attachment to the Black Belt nation thesis see Harry Haywood, *Negro Liberation* (New York 1948); Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 218-280; and Haywood's polemic against Huiswoud, "Against Bourgeois Liberal Distortion of Leninism on the Negro Question in the United States," *The Communist* (August 1930), 694-712.

²¹ *Daily Worker*, 15 April 1931; William Weinstone, "The Economic Crisis in the U.S. and the Tasks of the CP," *Communist International*, 15 February 1930, quoted in Howe and Coser, *American Communist Party*, 207; James S. Allen, "Organizing in the Depression South: A Communist's Memoir," *Nature, Society, and Thought*, 12 (2000), 51-52.

Haywood was forced to concede that a "conscious" orientation toward the basic premises of the Black Belt nation thesis was almost entirely lacking in the United States.²²

The literature that explores the emerging Third Period (1929-1934) and later Popular Front effectiveness of the communist movement in drawing black recruits and in convincing African Americans that communists were serious allies in the battle for justice and equality is almost universally silent on the concrete relevance of agitation and propagandizing around the Black Belt nation thesis, as well as its ultimate waning within communist circles. Robin Kelley concludes that while the theory and program of self-determination may well have inspired a few black intellectuals already won to Marxism, it "did not do much to build black working-class support."²³ Hosea Hudson's memoir, *Black Worker in the Deep South*, makes the point against its own attempt to valorize the Black Belt nation thesis. Hudson recounts how he was won to communism in the early 1930s by listening to an explanation of the Black Belt nation thesis, but the accent of the organizer's speech, and Hudson's later reaction to it, has little to do with the national right of self-determination; what emerges is a black Southerner's realization of the terror of white rule, and how it had been sustained and deepened by the class exploitation of blacks and could be overturned by working-class struggle.²⁴ It is difficult, then, not to come to the conclusion that communist anti-lynching campaigns, demands for interracial unionism or separate, militant African American labour organizations, defense endeavours such as the tremendously important Scottsboro Boys mobilizations of the early 1930s, and inclusion of blacks in the communist-led movement of the unemployed served to seal the shared fate of race and revolution far more effectively than the promise of a Black Belt nation.²⁵

²² Haywood, *Negro Liberation*, 216. See also Steve Nelson, James R. Barrett, Rob Ruck, *Steve Nelson: American Radical* (Pittsburgh 1981), 440.

²³ James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, 286; and the pointed conclusion on the matter in Robin D. G. Kelley, "'Afric's Sons with Banner Red': African American Communists and the Politics of Culture," in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York 1994), 115.

²⁴ Hosea Hudson, *Black Worker in the Deep South: A Personal Account* (New York 1972), 38-39.

²⁵ It is striking how other communist activity, both in the North and in the South, overshadows the Black Belt nation thesis in explaining African American attraction to communism. Of that attraction there is no doubt. In the late 1920s barely 50 blacks were affiliated with the Workers (Communist) Party, a figure that had grown to only 200 by March 1929. By the early 1930s official figures claimed 1300 African American Party members. See Allen, "Organizing in the Depression South," 18; *American Communism and Black Americans*, xv. On communist activity and black mobilization, in which the Black Belt nation appears as a shadowy backdrop, see Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge 1969); Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Great Depression* (Urbana and Chicago 1983), esp. 18-22, 45-47; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama*

Yet, for all of this, many black communists still battled the racism of comrades within the revolutionary movement and contended outside the ranks of the Party with "race conscious" politics that they found somewhat lacking. Such black recruits to communism perhaps identified not so much with their own Party locals, as with the Communist International, and its proclaimed international solidarity with oppressed peoples of colour. This further muddies the waters of the race/revolution relation as it developed *within* the United States, but it offers an explanation of why it was that so few black cadre of the Communist Party ever effectively integrated into the apparatus as a component of revolutionary leadership, particularly in the period when the Black Belt nation thesis held sway.²⁶

Hubert Harrison never joined the Workers (Communist) Party but he was, before his premature death in the late 1920s, a link to this problematized class/race politics. A critic of Dubois as early as the World War I epoch, he also found the politics of Garveyism increasingly unsatisfactory as it took its nationalist program in the worst of directions, including brokered arrangements with the Ku Klux Klan, and descended into hucksterism and manipulations of black supporters, culminating in Garvey's 1923 conviction for mail fraud. A leading figure in the militantly radical "New Negro" movement of 1919-1920, Harrison was suspicious of the implicit claims that the Harlem Renaissance writers of the mid-1920s represented something *new* in African American culture. On the contrary, Harrison stated unequivocally, "Seriously, the matter of a Negro literary renaissance is like that of the snakes of Ireland — there isn't any." Staunch in a 1927 insistence that, "This 'Negro literary renaissance' has its existence at present only in the noxious night life of Greenwich Village neurotics who invented it, not for the black brothers' profit but for their own," Harrison deplored the tendency of African American critics to snub black literary accomplishment until it was recognized by whites. He insisted that there existed a longstanding black contribution to the arts *and* to radical politics that cried out for recognition.²⁷ In this he was also perhaps raising an original political critique of the growing aestheticism of the Harlem-based, Locke-collected *New Negro*, which Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has suggested represented a depoliticization

Communists During the Great Depression (Chapel Hill 1990); Ruth Needleman, *Black Freedom Fighters in Steel: The Struggle for Democratic Unionism* (Ithaca, 2003), 27, 184, 193-194.

²⁶James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, 177-180; Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 121-126; Nell Painter, *The Narratives of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (Cambridge, Massachusetts 1979), 25-26. On the Black Belt nation thesis and Ben Davis, a prominent black figure in the Communist Party leadership in later years, see Horne, "The Red and the Black."

²⁷"'No Negro Literary Renaissance' Says Well-Known Writer," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 12 March 1927, *Hubert Harrison Reader*, 351-354.

of the more radical movement of the same name Harrison had promoted in 1919-1920.²⁸

Two highly significant and wonderfully useful recent publications allow an entrée into this history of race and revolution. The first, Barbara Foley's *Spectres of 1919*, uses an examination of cultural production to illuminate the extent to which a revolutionary moment of expansive artistic and political possibility found itself clipped of its class-conscious, militant edge in nationalist negotiations. While its denouement text is Locke's *The New Negro*, rather than the Comintern's Black Belt nation thesis (which is barely mentioned in the book), Foley's relentless exposure of what she calls *metonymic nationalism*, nevertheless links these 1925 and 1928 statements in a suggestive and imaginative political reading of the failure of 1919's class and race promise:

metonymic nationalism refers to a practice of establishing a claim to legitimacy and belonging through a series of linkages that posits the nation at one end, black folks at the other, and soil and region in between the two. In a society that was dominated by the nativist rhetoric of '100 percent Americanism' and the evolutionary rhetoric of eugenics and denied African Americans the most basic rights as citizens, the cultural pluralist assertion that African Americans might 'stand for' the nation as ably as any other group — that they might figure metonymically to signify the whole — clearly was intended to combat disenfranchisement and bigotry. What I argue, however, is that this insistence on the 'soiliness' and 'rootedness' of black folks did not entirely refute the arguments of the racists but instead ended up reproducing various features of the dominant ideology by reinforcing essentialist notions of racial difference. A purportedly antiracist nationalism thus conjoined with the nationalism of 100 percent Americanism. But there are also salient connections between metonymic nationalism and the doctrine of revolutionary self-determination embraced by many on the contemporaneous Left, of various races and nations. To the extent that not just cultural pluralist liberals but also leftists embraced the doctrine of progressive nationalism as a necessary stage in the movement toward internationalism and classlessness, the responsibility for this inability to negate and supersede current thinking about race must be broadly shared. (ix)

To be sure, Foley nowhere suggests an appreciation of Stalinism's contribution to this process, opting instead for a strict Luxemburgist construction of nationalism's dead-ends politically. (116-117) But her cultural reading of the 1919-1925 years flows directly into the Trotskyist challenge of another recent book, the Christopher Phelps-introduced publication of a long-obscured document, Max Shachtman's "Communism and the Negro." Phelps' lengthy contextualization of this essay, as well as Shachtman's statement, the first sustained response of the United States Left Opposition to the Black Belt nation thesis, and, up to the point of its drafting in 1933, the most serious effort of the American anti-Stalinist revolutionary Left to engage with race, have recently appeared under the title *Race and Revolution*.

²⁸Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations*, 24 (Fall 1988), 129-155, esp. 147.



Harry Horwood,
1948/International Publishers

Foley sets the stage for a discussion of Locke's *The New Negro* with a rigorously politicized reading of the momentous developments of 1919. Unlike so many historical accounts, however, Foley refuses the separations of class and race, revolution and reaction. Her presentation of this period, drawn mainly from a wide reading of secondary sources, a survey of the black and liberal press and accessible printed materials relevant to the revolutionary Left, as well as the voluminous pages produced by the counter-revolutionary mobilization of state anti-communism, is weakest in its exploration of the socialist Left-Wing and the nascent revolutionary underground. But its strengths are nonetheless considerable. An opening chapter rightly stresses the revolutionary potential of the mobilizations of 1919, emerging out of the crucible of war and the Bolshevik victory of 1917, and proceeding through the widening reach of radical, anti-capitalist ideas and escalating class militancy that peaked in general and sympathetic strike movements that threatened a "red" reordering of America.

Red is thus the colour of both class and race in Foley's account, the crimson flag of revolution flying atop the edifice of workers' struggle, the blood spilled in

riot and chauvinist rampage being that of blacks: "If foreign-born workers were the principal targets of overt political repression, native-born African-Americans were the principal targets of physical violence; the term *Red Summer* pertains not only to government anti-radicalism but also to the blood spilled in the many lynchings and race riots of 1919." (12) As a politics of revolution surged through immigrant quarters and threatened to bring Left-Wing socialists, Wobbly syndicalists, and advocates of workers' control in the mainstream craft and industrial unions into a pro-Soviet Party, the New Negro (an old appellation once associated with the relatively tame, Tuskegee politics of Booker T. Washington's agenda of self-advancement through education and training) was reborn radical, militant, and combative. The communist-raider, Attorney-General A. Mitchell Palmer, declared succinctly, "The Negro is 'seeing red'." (13)

Class and colour thus fused in the recognition that the murderous arm of race repression was raised against labour, black and white. "Lynching protects money," declared Walter White, an NAACP field marshal who investigated sharecropper murders, debt peonage, and the culture of Southern class relations, reporting on them in the *Crisis*, providing the empirical substance of a 1919 report on *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1919*, and later authoring the influential *Rope and Faggot* (1929). An advocate of unionizing domestic workers, the poet and black clubwoman, Carrie Clifford, moved left with the outrage of the East St. Louis race riot of 28 July 1919. Her "Race Hate" and "Silent Protest Parade" made common cause with "poor black workers" who had "fled in distress from the South/ To find themselves murdered and mobbed in the North." She railed against a ruling order now dripping with the blood of black victims: "Thou has no one deceived, not e'en thyself/ *Thy bloody hands are raised for power and pelf!*" (22-23) Alfred Kreymborg's "Red Chant" explored the class interests that bound black and white together in opposition to a common "master":

Let a master prick me with his pin —
the bubble of blood shows red.
Let a master prick you with his pin —
the bubble of blood shows red. (26)

As black and white saw common scarlet on the political horizon of the United States, New Negro poets such as Claude McKay looked to the Red Dawn of a revolutionary East, their homeland hopes raised by the banner of possibility that appeared with the Soviet commitment to anticolonialism. The first issue of Max and Crystal Eastman's *Liberator* announced the need for relentless Left agitation around the "social and political equality of the black and white races," (40) and anti-capitalist, pro-working class thought animated the pages of publications widely read among African Americans. The New Negro of 1919, Foley shows, was as red as he or she was black, "an anticapitalist radical who envisioned African

American emancipation as inseparable from – if not identical with – the project of class-conscious, multiracial alliance.” (69)

As Foley unravels layer after layer of connective, historical tissue, exposing the reciprocities of class and race in this period, she is nevertheless careful not to tear out of her analysis the persistent presence and survival of nationalist idioms. These necessarily figured in the advocacy of race consciousness by ex-socialists such as Harrison, but they also permeated black liberal bodies such as the NAACP, Garvey's UNIA, and Briggs' early Afrocentric ABB and its organ, the *Crusader*. The 'class first' black socialism of A. Philip Randolph's and Chandler Owen's *Messenger* was remarkably immune from this representation of race essence, Claude McKay's December 1919 "Birds of Prey," conveying well the condemnation of capitalism and promotion of multiracial class consciousness that contended somewhat uneasily with 'race conscious' positions common in other venues where the New Negro was being birthed:

They swoon down upon us in merciless might,
 They fasten in our bleeding flesh their claws
 (We may be black or yellow, brown or white)
 And, tugging and tearing without rest or pause,
 They flap their hideous wings with wild delight
 And stuff our gory hearts into their maws. (53)

Race representation in Briggs's *Crusader* often exhibited in this same 1919 context less concern with revolutionary obliteration of the colour line and more forceful articulation of black advancement and defence of ground seized in the name of equality:

O! race! Make this your battle-cry —
 Engrave it on your heart
 It's time for us to 'do or die',
 To play a bolder part.

For the blood you've spilled in France
 You must — and will — be free
 So, from now on, let us advance
 With this, "DON'T TREAD ON ME!" (65)

Ironically, given the challenge of communism that would unfold in the aftermath of 1919-1920, the socialist *Messenger* would temper its revolutionary zeal, and by the early 1920s adopt a more accommodationist stand toward the bourgeois state. In contrast, the *Crusader*, its leading figures attracted to the Workers' Party, was less and less likely to see the "caucasians" of the world, regardless of class, as exercising a kind of universal "lordship" over peoples of colour. By 1922, it disseminated an analysis of class power, constructing racism among white workers as a false con-

0.25 **LYNCHING**

Communist pamphlet, 1932.

by
H. Haywood
and
M. Howard

5c

**International
Pamphlets**



sciousness fostered by capitalist initiative and need. One of its leading spokesmen, Richard B. Moore, was known to government agents as “the most outspoken, daring and radical among all the other negro “Reds” in Harlem.” (63)

This awkward balancing of nation, class, and race is presented with care and subtlety by Foley, who stresses, however, that 1919 was a unique, albeit brief, moment of “ecumenical radicalism.” Lines of differentiation that would emerge early in the 1920s and, by 1922, harden into irreconcilable camps, seemed transcended in the possibility of a revolutionary solidarity. (66-67) To understand why the momentum of 1919 did not sustain itself, Foley turns to a wide-ranging discussion of the limits of the Left, concentrating first on the Socialist Party and then the early communist movement. She explores the revolutionary Left’s shortcomings as a series of truncations and terminations. These included reformist illusion in the capacity to capture the state; and economist reductions of class to “labour” that accented the political redress of “the wage” rather than revolutionary self-emancipation and far-reaching societal transformation.

Consequent on the latter was a reading of race as merely the substratum of difficulty associated with black versus white competition in the labor market, rather than recognition of a critical necessity in the peculiar fusion of colour and class that served as the foundation of a specific United States regime of capitalist accumulation, premised on African American superexploitation and the deforming consequences of racism within the white working class. Yet another limitation was a profound inattention to *ideology* that overdetermined socialist thought into simplified binaries of ruling class "propaganda" and working-class "psychology," displacing sophisticated engagement with the "bad" nationalisms of 100 per cent Americanism promulgated by eugenicists, nativists, and racists, and the "good" nationalisms of revolutionary self-determination, anti-colonialism, and cultural pluralism that were often held out as the basis of internationalism. This last Left limitation is indeed central to Foley's overall dialectical argument: "The Left's attempts to articulate a genuine alternative to 100 percent Americanism were from the outset hobbled by their accession to many of its premises. The Left's embrace of self-determination would constitute a counterdiscourse to the dominant nationalist ideology, not a means to its negation." (79)

This intriguing formulation of Left limitation is rich in suggestion, and offers a stimulating array of commentary on United States socialists, New Negro advocates, nationalism, and what was then known as "the Negro Question." Foley provides copious evidence of the ways in which socialist analysts in the United States, primarily white but also black (her critical commentary on Hubert Harrison is a rare questioning of this important figure²⁹), isolated race in particular cul-de-sacs. She also hints at significant wellsprings of understanding, noting the underappreciated conclusion of W.E.B. Dubois's *The Negro* (1915), a Pan-Africanist statement that, in its paraphrasing of Marx, preceded the far more often quoted classic, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) by two decades:

The Pan-African movement when it comes will not, however, be merely a narrow racial propaganda. Already the more far-seeing Negroes sense the coming unities: a unity of the working classes everywhere, a unity of the colored races, a new unity of men. The proposed economic solution to the Negro problem in Africa and America has turned the thoughts of Negroes to a realization of the fact that the modern white laborer of Europe and America has the key to the serfdom of black folk, in his support of militarism and colonial expansion. He is beginning to say to these workingmen that so long as black laborers are slaves, white laborers cannot be free.

That Dubois could follow these words with the essentializing passage, "the character of the Negro race is the best and greatest hope; for in its normal condition it is at once the strongest and gentlest of the races of men," reinforces Foley's emphasis on

²⁹For another, less forceful, critical engagement see James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, 127-128.

the ways in which the *ideology* of nation structured the class/race fusion in the era of the revolutionary New Negro.³⁰ It also prefigures Dubois's formulation of class/race hierarchical relations in *Black Reconstruction* as a psychological wage, an interpretive direction brilliantly employed in David Roediger's foundational statement of whiteness studies,³¹ but one that Foley here criticizes as depoliticizing "the genesis of racially coded consciousness." (102-103)

This discussion of the limitations of the Left is forceful and insightful, but it falters on the failure to adequately probe the ways in which the communist movement crystallized out of the reconfiguration of the socialist Left-Wing, a not inconsiderable development in the revolutionary tide of 1919. Foley relies largely on established criticism of the Socialist Party's inadequate appreciation of the significance of race, but she fails to look beyond the merest of surface relations in the meaning of the formation of the Communist and Communist Labor Parties in 1919. Her reading rests almost entirely on Crystal Eastman's account of the Chicago Socialist Party Convention break-up of August 1919 that appeared in *Liberator*. The result is an inadequate grappling with the ways in which the CP and CLP appropriated understandings of nationalism and self-determination and transferred them to the emerging communist movement in the 1921-1925 years. Foley simply does not present enough evidence of this process, merely assuming that a Socialist Party *ideology* of Americanism was assimilated to a revolutionary advocacy of self-determination. Far more engagement with the profound *internationalism* of the communist underground, as well as understanding of the complex negotiation of the nationalist/internationalist dialectic in the often ultra-left foreign-language sections of emerging communism, is required before Foley's assertions can be accepted.

Less contentious is Foley's extensive treatment of the rhetoric of racist anti-radicalism, which considers, not the determining limitations of the Left, but the pressures from the Right, pushing race and class into their separate, and marginalized, spaces of retreat. As the "scientistic" assault of eugenics and the appealingly packaged chauvinisms of various nativist movements and writings racialized radicalism as an alien "Other" and radicalized race as of concern only to the threatening forces of Bolshevism and anarchism, the New Negro movement of 1919 faced a concerted onslaught of staunch opposition to its unique bringing to-

³⁰ W.E. Burghardt DuBois, *The Negro* (New York 1915), 241-242. Marx's words were: "Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded." *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production* (Chicago 1906), "The Working Day," Chapter X, Section vii, 301.

³¹ DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in the United States, 1860-1880* (New York 1977), 27-30, 700-701; David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York and London 1991), 12-13, 180. For a somewhat overstated and underappreciative critique of Roediger see Eric Arensen, "Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination," *International Labor and Working Class History*, 60 (Fall 2001), 3-32.

gether of class and race in a politics and aesthetics of anticapitalist opposition. This politico-cultural Thermidor, articulated in Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color against White World Supremacy* (1920) and *The Revolt Against Civilization* (1922), conditioned a climate in which United States legislative enactments in 1921 and 1924 restricted immigration, Americanization plans were widely promoted by church, state, and the business elite, popular anti-Semitism flourished, and racist pseudoscience inundated magazines and other popular culture media. This, of course, was the hothouse climate that would dress two Italian immigrants, Nicolo Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, for the electric chair.

Perhaps because Foley does not adequately explore the communist oppositional current in the early 1920s, writing it off too easily as a captive of older Socialist Party limitations, she pays little attention to the movements of labour defense and trade union radicalization that emerged in this period and that might have at least provided some indication of counter-mobilizations directed at the racist anti-radicalism of these years. As significant as Foley's treatment of cultural production is, then, it also proves something of a limitation. For it conditions a failure to appreciate the distinctive *organizational* advances over past Left practice that were evident in Comintern and Workers' Party efforts to establish committees for "Negro" work and practical mobilization around congresses of African Americans. This is a point confirmed by one communist leader of the time, James Cannon. He would later reflect on the context of 1919 and the early 1920s in terms entirely congruent with Foley's book:

The Communist Party's break with the traditional position of American radicalism on the Negro question coincided with profound changes which had been taking place among the Negroes themselves.... Their new spirit of self assertion was answered by a mounting score of lynchings and a string of race riots across the country, North as well as South.... All of this taken together — the hopes and disappointments, the new spirit of self-assertion, and the savage reprisals — contributed to the emergence of a new Negro movement in the making.... What the emerging new movement of the American Negroes — a ten percent minority — needed most, and lacked almost entirely, was effective support in the white community in general and in the labor movement, its necessary ally, in particular. The Communist Party, aggressively championing the cause of the Negroes and calling for an alliance of the Negro people and the militant labor movement, came into the new situation as a catalytic agent at the right time.³²

³²James P. Cannon, "The Russian Revolution and the American Negro Movement," in James Cannon, ed., *The First Ten Years of American Communism: Report of a Participant* (New York 1962), 234-235. Note the sources cited in footnote 14 above. While too much stock cannot be placed in the reactionary anti-communism of this period, it being prone to exaggerate the threat of revolution, it is nevertheless telling that in publications arising out of this politics of fear "the Negro" and communism were centrally linked. See R.M. Whitney, *Reds in America* (Boston and Los Angeles, 1924), 197-214; Report of the Joint Legislative Committee Investigating Seditious Activities, Filed 24 April 1920, in the Senate of the State

Blinded to this significant development by her insistence that the entirety of the Left remained incarcerated in older SP limitations, Foley looks elsewhere and finds a problematic resistance to racism in the more liberal milieu of academic writings on race.

She concentrates her analysis on the anthropological discourse of cultural relativism, promulgated by Franz Boas, Melville Herskovits, Robert M. Lowie, and others. This Boasian school did indeed have a direct influence on the writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance, and 1920s racists rightly regarded Boas as their major antagonist. But as Foley demonstrates, if Boas and his following mounted a powerful refutation of racist thought on the hierarchy of civilizations and the superiority of particular "races," they were themselves captive of their own paradigm, in which race was accepted as a category of explanatory value, rather than appreciated and theorized as an *ideological* construct inextricably bound to capitalist need, and, as such, infused with class meanings. Boasian anthropology would be to academic social science what Alain Locke's *The New Negro* was to the 1919 New Negro movement's evocation of a multiracial anticapitalist revolutionary program: a loyal opposition assimilated to nationalism's capacity to undermine the revolutionary challenge of class *and* race. It was of signal importance that Herskovits, who had worn proudly an Industrial Workers of the World button in his undergraduate days at Columbia, celebrated the Bolsheviks in 1919, and as late as 1923 had written for the preeminent magazine of cultural communism, *Liberator*, would contribute an essay to *The New Negro* on cultural adaptation and "Americanism." Black Harlem, thought Herskovits, was as American as apple pie. But if the red had been peeled away, and if the fruit was not white, it was not quite black either: "it's the same pattern, only a different shade."³³

How did this assimilation happen? Foley suggests the reciprocities of reform, revolt, and reaction, exploring how, in a pressured context of racist attack, liberal cultural pluralists, a youthful movement of the avant-garde known as Young America and headed by Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford and others, and the culturalist wing of the Workers Party that gathered around the *Liberator*, created a "good," metonymic nationalism that stood in opposition to the 100 per cent Americanism of the Palmer Raids, Judge Lynch, and Vigilante, Incorporated. This metonymic nationalism was often ordered by metaphors of earthly place and deterministic soil, organic tropes that could drift in the direction of essentialism: "This land is ours by right of birth./This land is ours by right of toil./We helped to turn its virgin earth/Our sweat is in its fruitful soil." (192) However much this Left construction of nation incorporated elements of anti-colonial internationalism and embraced America as a land of diversity, it also found itself impaled on the very

of New York, *Revolutionary Radicalism: Its History, Purpose, and Tactics, with an Exposition and Discussion of the Steps Being Taken and Required to Curb It* (Albany 1920), Part I, Volume II, 1476-1522.

³³Melville J. Herskovits, "The Negro's Americanism," in Locke, *New Negro*, 368.

reifications of place and representation, such as Manifest Destiny or later understandings of "development," that had long fed the dominant discourse. As a consequence it could "not move beyond a politics of antinomy or an aesthetics of irony." (187) Elements in *Liberator* came closest, predictably, to a forthright challenge to this process of incorporation, and there were voices raised against the cultural pluralism so championed in the 1920s, claiming it did little more than put "a hood on the class war." (189)

Perhaps no subjectivity was more prone to the confusing malaise of "belonging" evident in this metonymic nationalism than race. As early as 1918 Clement Wood had constructed African American identity in "placed" and essentializing ways:

I saw a Negro in the snow—
His vast face dark and pondering,
Shoulders whitened, and head hunched low.

What vagabonding lust could bring
You from the cotton-field's soft glow,
The white magnolia drifts of Spring?

The thin sun here will whiten your face,
The lean, long winters ruthlessly
Wither your slouching jungle grace.

Our nights grow longer, better flee
This callous and transforming place
Or would you grow no more than we? (192-193)

Wood is undoubtedly an easy poet to target. His collections in the years 1917-1928 included *Glad of Earth* (some unusual left-wing poetry), *The Earth Turns South*, *Nigger*, *The Best Negro Jokes*, and *Three Negro Poems*. But as Foley indicates, the nationalistic association of race with soil, roots, and even a democracy of the small property owner (associated canonically with Walt Whitman) had longstanding purchase on ideas of Americanism.

This would help ease the New Negro of 1919 into the politically aestheticized *New Negro* of Locke's textualism. For Locke, himself a product of the New Negro revolt, opted to cultivate older Negro nationalism and walk, not in the politico-analytic shoes of multiracial class struggle, but in the folk-centered,³⁴ culturalist view of race as tradition that congealed in the ashes of 1919's extinguished flames, once burning so brightly with the possibility of the coming together of class and race. Foley concludes that, "Locke's reconceptualization of the newly

³⁴For a Canadian discussion see Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Anti-Modernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montréal and Kingston 1994).

migrated proletariat as a folk figured centrally in his turn from class consciousness to class collaboration." (199) *The New Negro* was socially protestant rather than genuinely radical.³⁵

Such a move was realized in various ways, not the least through mechanical revision, even exclusion. Locke acquiesced to editorial pressures from liberal publishers to excise radical content, and Hubert Harrison, originally commissioned to produce a 2,200 word essay on "The White Man's War" for the *Survey Graphic* issue that was to prove a pilot publication for the eventual book, *The New Negro*, was unceremoniously dropped from the project. His indictment of capitalism undoubtedly troubled specific commercially-minded interests with whom Locke was now entwined. Sociological commentary that appeared in the *Survey Graphic* that likened Harlem to a segregated ghetto was apparently judged by Locke too contentious to meld easily with his celebration of the transplantation of the Negro folk from South to North. It was quietly dropped from *The New Negro*. So, too, was a Mahonri Young illustration of an African-American proletarian, titled simply "The Laborer." Elsie Johnson McDougald's original essay on the trials of black womanhood was softened by the addition of a gendered tribute to "the mothers of the race," and the *The New Negro*'s frontispiece would be Winold Reiss's "The Black Madonna." Such changes called attention "to the service [black womanhood] is rendering to the nation, in [the] struggle against great odds to educate and care for one group of the country's children." (228)

Where the New Negro of 1919 offered a revolutionary challenge to American life, then, *The New Negro*, echoing Duboisian understandings of "the gift" of black folk, saw race as a present "of the black tropics" to the nation.³⁶ Yet, within Dubois and his writing, a contest unfolded, in which the essentialism of black nationalism and the subtle congealing of class and race coexisted in an awkwardly creative friction. Oddly enough, Dubois's contribution to *The New Negro* was the one essay that seemed out of step with Locke's rather strained attempts to present "the color line" as somehow having "happily been taken down."³⁷ Dubois's "The Negro Mind Reaches Out," which closes *The New Negro*, is both more consciously anti-imperialistic and pro-working class than much of what appears in the volume, but it also retreats into prides of place that privilege a location as the answer to capital's ravagings: "Liberia that is a little thing set upon a Hill."³⁸ Yet, by 1925, when these words appeared, the promise of Liberia as a classless utopia rang as hollow as those

³⁵ Locke, *The New Negro*, 11.

³⁶ W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago 1903), declared the Negro folk-song "the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people." (251) Note, as well, Dubois, *The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America* (Boston 1924); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York 1974), 309-324.

³⁷ Locke, *The New Negro*, 9-10.

³⁸ Dubois, "The Negro Mind Reaches Out," in Locke, *The New Negro*, 414.

claims of an earlier "city on a hill," John Winthrop's Puritan America. A revolutionary resolution of the capitalist deformations of race and class would not take place on the soil of nation. As Foley concludes, "The spectres of 1919, threatening always to become flesh, continue to haunt those whose hold on political power and pursuit of capital accumulation are founded on racist division and exploitation — in the United States and around the world. It is to be hoped that a fuller understanding of both the failures and achievements of those pursuing the 'vision splendid' in the past will aid us as we continue along the winding path of our collective journey toward that better world." (249)

Foley's exploration of the cultural ascent of a nationalist resolution of the challenge to radicalism posed by race and class, a political and materialist *descent* from the threatening revolutionary possibilities of 1919, leads directly to the elaboration of the Comintern's Black Belt nation thesis. Communist Party propaganda pamphlets of the early 1930s that address "negro liberation" invariably commence with an evocation of land and soil that is charged with the problematic nationalist essentialisms Foley has so witheringly exposed in her study. James S. Allen's *Negro Liberation* (1932), its cover adorned with a United States map, the Black Belt sharply demarcated in red, commences:

In the light of a full moon a group of Negro croppers gathered at the rear of a cabin in Sumter County, South Carolina, intently studying a map roughly sketched on the ground. They had come from the surrounding plantations to hold a stealthy meeting of what was then just the beginnings of the Croppers Union. A Negro worker stood in the center of the group explaining the meaning of that rough map. He had sketched a map of the United States in the earth with a twig and marked off those sections of the South in which the Negroes were in a majority. The croppers were greatly amazed. For the first time they realized that not only in Sumter County, S.C., do the Negroes make up more than half the population but that there is a continuous stretch of land extending like a crescent moon from southern Maryland to Arkansas in which Negroes outnumber the whites.³⁹

It is this passage, indeed, that the irascible Left Oppositionist polemicist, Max Shachtman, ridiculed mercilessly in his "Communism and the Negro," a direct rejoinder to the Communist Party's Black Belt nation thesis:

this little narrative is sufficient to lay bare the thoroughly ludicrous nature of the new Stalinist theory on the American Negro question.... Can a situation be imagined in which it would be necessary for an agitator to penetrate to the home of the most backward peasants in Ireland in order to draw a map of the country ... and prove that there not only is such a place as Ireland but that its inhabitants should be sovereign in it? Or Poland? Or Korea? Or in the homeland of any genuine nation? (78-79)

³⁹ Allen, *Negro Liberation*, 3.

The publication of Shachtman's polemical document is an important reminder that there were those on the revolutionary Left who resisted the nationalist appeal of race essentialism. As Christopher Phelps's lucid introduction explains, the putting together of this position was by no means an easy or immediate development. Bred in the bone of Industrial Workers of the World and Socialist Party limitations concerning race, and further incarcerated within the Stalinist deformations of the mid-to-late 1920s, the Trotskyist forces in the United States at first accepted the Black Belt nation thesis and championed self-determination as "the key to the [race] question" in the United States. (xxxii) There were always those, like the youthful Albert Glotzer, who resisted, but for the most part the small, materially constrained, and politically besieged nascent Trotskyist movement, eventually organized in the Communist League of America (Opposition) [CLA], was impaled on uncertainties and ambivalences on the programmatic direction of African American work. Not until one of its senior trade union members, the Scandinavian-American Bolshevik, Arne Swabeck, traveled to Pripinko, Turkey in 1932-1933 to discuss "the Negro Question" with Trotsky, and Shachtman drafted his "Communism and the Negro," did the possibility of an alternative to the Communist Party's reification of the Black Belt nation congeal. Even then, debate continued, with Trotsky far more open to the utilization of self-determination as a transitional demand in the black struggle than were his comrades in the United States, who by the late 1930s had come to see the race question in America as less a national issue than a matter of an oppressed minority "whose position and interests are subordinated to the class relations of the country." Blacks were integral to the class struggle, however, and, in Swabeck's words, they were likely to prove "a decisive factor" in any forging of a revolutionary proletarian challenge to capitalism. (xxxvi) Trotsky's position, far more subtle and dialectical than that of the Communist Party, nevertheless retained an openness on self-determination, holding that *if* African Americans in significant numbers advocated a separate black nation, they should be fully supported by the revolutionary Left, a view later to be espoused by C.L.R. James. This, of course, had never been the case, and in 1933 it was understandable that Shachtman, whose position crystallized in an attempt to win Trotsky (whose knowledge of African Americans was minimal and whose grasp of the intricacies of the "Negro Question" was abstract) over to a rejection of the Black Belt nation thesis, would stake out particularly strong ground.⁴⁰

Unfortunately, a series of developments internal to the CLA as well as external to it, including the growing international crisis signaled by the rise of fascism and the drift to war, placed the resolution of the ambiguities in the Trotskyist position on the American "Negro Question" on a political backburner. Among the small

⁴⁰Phelps provides a lengthy and useful summary of these debates. See, as well, the documents collected in George Breitman, ed., *Leon Trotsky on Black Nationalism and Self-Determination* (New York 1967); Scott McLemee, ed., *C.L.R. James on the 'Negro Question'* (Jackson 1996).

anti-Stalinist revolutionary ranks of the official Left Opposition, the central programmatic issue of race and revolution was destined, for a time, to be settled only in irresolution. The matter remained in limbo for five years until the formation of the Socialist Workers Party in 1938. At that time, James's position had superseded Shachtman's, and concessions were made, albeit with certain crucial caveats, to the advocacy of self-determination.⁴¹

Phelps's presentation of all of this is richly grounded in an assessment of Shachtman's contribution, and he is obviously drawn to the articulate Marxist ambition of "Communism and the Negro" "to come to terms with race and racism as constitutive themes in American history, society, and politics." (xvii) He links Shachtman's analysis to later historical writing, from that of Herbert Aptheker on slave revolts to Eric Foner and W.E. B. Dubois on Reconstruction, pointing to how Shachtman, who relied on a *political* reading of history, rather than archival research, managed to anticipate much that was creative and insightful in future scholarship.⁴² At those points where Phelps distances himself from Shachtman, he is perhaps unduly captivated by our own age's political refusal of the kind of revolutionary program the Communist League of America in 1933 saw as an answer to all questions of oppression and exploitation. While this may indeed open our eyes to deficiencies in the Marxist movement of the past, it can also close them in undue deference to the kinds of nationalist positions, organizing initiatives, and representations that Foley suggests contain many pitfalls for the Left.

Two examples in Phelps's introduction make this point. Phelps argues, for instance, that Shachtman denied "any value to the kind of independent organization so important in black political history," citing cases such as the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. With his uncompromising commitment to socialist black-white labour unity as the only avenue of advance, Phelps states, Shachtman was too ready to insist that there was only one way forward, an ostensibly dogmatic stand that posited the *impossibility* of achieving interracial equality in any other way. This, in Phelps's views elided "the decisive strategic question of what people of color should do when the white working class is unwilling to support special black demands — or, even worse, given to resistance to black equality or outright

⁴¹ On the CLA period that contextualized Shachtman's drafting of "Communism and the Negro" in 1933 see the excellent documentary collection, *Dog Days: James P. Cannon vs. Max Shachtman in the Communist League of America, 1931-1934* (New York 2002), which includes detailed commentary on the Trotskyist debate over "the Negro Question." (40-44) Shachtman's break from the politics of the CLA/SWP in 1940 culminated in his founding the Workers Party. Its program understated "the Negro Question," boiling down a position on race to the most basic essentials elaborated in "Communism and the Negro." See Max Shachtman, *The Fight for Socialism: The Principles and Program of the Workers Party* (New York 1946).

⁴² Dubois, *Black Reconstruction*; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York 1988); Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York 1943).

racism." (xxi) This is, abstractly, a legitimate point, although Phelps reads too much of a program's practical implementation off the pages of a purposively polemical "internal" document meant to reorient a position on a pivotal question. Just how the politics of Shachtman's conceptualization of "the Negro Question" would have evolved in the give-and-take of negotiating relations with the rising militancy of civil rights agitation, for instance, is certainly a more open question than Phelps seems willing to acknowledge. Moreover, the history of 20th-century class-race relations is an indication of an important duality: much working-class racism remains and demands repudiation; but over time there have also been registered, in struggle, important advances within the white working class, larger and larger sections of it having been won to see the necessity of black-white unity and the imperative of refusing racism and addressing the special oppression African Americans live within. Shachtman's insistence that "the Negro has but one way out: united with the white working class, to fight for the extermination of the class which keeps him in servitude and for the overthrow of the social order in which the Negro is the nethermost layer," is perhaps read by Phelps as more dogmatic than it need be. Precisely because Shachtman recognized and detailed the racism of white labour and the brutal violence inflicted on all who fought for equality, especially African Americans, he posited his argument for black advance on the necessity of relentless struggle against all forms of racist repression, from the institutions of segregation to the terror of lynch law. Who is to say, in our time, that the claim that the only hope for *both* black and white workers lies in unified struggle against a capitalism that may not have "invented" racism but that is its primary conduit of continuity, is indeed so wrong-headed?

Phelps tends to reduce this question of class unity of black and white proletarians to Shachtman's antipathy to liberal bourgeois and petty bourgeois leaderships, such as those that run through African American progressive movements from the NAACP and Dubois to the civil rights mobilizations of Martin Luther King. He concedes that other writers, such as Adolph Reed, E. Franklin Frazier, and Oliver Cox came to view the matter similarly.⁴³ He valorizes C.L.R. James's more open-ended appreciation of the possibility that black nationalist currents involving non-proletarian elements could indeed play a more positive role than Shachtman's "Communism and the Negro" suggested. Trotsky is held to the same position, even though this is, again, read off remarks that were posed abstractly and that required a more sustained discussion and the testing of historically-contextualized implementation. In this critical positioning Phelps adopts a more liberally generous (but somewhat indiscriminate) approach to currents reaching from Garveyism to the Nation of Islam, and including King, Malcolm X, the Student Non-Violent

⁴³ See Adolph Reed, Jr., *W.E.B. DuBois and American Political Thought* (New York 1997); Reed, *Class Notes* (New York 2000); E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York 1957); Oliver Cromwell Cox, *Caste, Class, and Race* (New York 1948).

Co-ordinating Committee, and the Detroit-based League of Revolutionary Black Workers, than he claims Shachtman's document would have allowed. This is linked directly to Shachtman's uncompromising rejection of the Communist Party's Black Belt nation thesis, which Phelps massages into acceptability by claiming that self-determination would evolve from the demand for a separate African-American country to a Black Panther Party-type expression of "power to the people," through which institutions of democratic self-governance could be set up within capitalism, "community" control of police and schools achieved, and more equitable distribution of wealth secured via particular avenues of economic development. Phelps sees much virtue in Shachtman's principled document, but he feels compelled to provide a rejoinder to what he considers, like so many leftists in our time, "the terrible flaw of sectarianism that would hamstring the revolutionary anti-Stalinist left across the twentieth century." The Stalinist accent on "self-determination," in his view, had the largely positive effect of encouraging "bold *interracial* organizing, not agitation for a Black Belt state," and "Neither Comintern fantasies of iron discipline nor Trotskyist emphasis on programmatic correctness leaves much room for appreciating such ironies." (I, liv)

What this misses, I think, is what Foley suggests, and what Shachtman was trying to grapple with in 1933: that a good nationalism is not necessarily an adequate answer to bad nationalisms. Phelps too easily skirts obvious Marxist critiques of black nationalism, avoiding assiduously any pointed refusal of the sectarianism and problematic policies that have historically animated "race" politics. He understates contemporary radical arguments against Dubois and the NAACP (such as those that appeared in the *Messenger* or those that were posed by Hubert Harrison). And his listing of those 1950s and 1960s developments in the civil rights struggle bypasses an analysis of the differentiated ways in which varied African American organizations and movements espoused "black longing for self-reliance and self-determination," some of which addressed class and nation in ways far more progressive than others. (lix) Practice, unlike theory, is indeed often cut with irony, but the question that Phelps's elegant and attractive engagement with Shachtman's "Communism and the Negro" tends to deflect, is what was lost to an historical practice of class and race struggle through unnecessary concession to a national idiom that had weak purchase on the actual material consciousness of *either* blacks or whites? To reduce this question to a binary opposition of "Comintern disciplinary fantasy" and "Trotskyist fetishization of program," the answer to which is an anvil of ironic appreciation, is a trope of the sort Foley locates in another era around a series of other issues. If the choice is structured angularly between this and Shachtman's conclusion, it is not entirely clear the Old Left Oppositionist was so wrong.

The militant proletariat inscribes upon its banner in this country the uncompromising demand for full and equal rights for the oppressed Negro, so that he may rise out of the position of debasement and the backwardness to which he has been forced by a decadent ruling class

to the level of human dignity and consciousness that will make him the invaluable comrade-in-arms of the white proletarian. In their joint struggle for proletarian revolution, they will sweep away the abominable structure of imperialist capitalism, rooting out the barbarous remnants of slavery and serfdom, and abolishing the poisonous system of caste inequality, ostracism, misery and exploitation under which the millions of American Negroes suffer today. Any other road is deception, leading through mirages to the brink of the precipice. The proletarian revolution is the road to freedom. (102)

The fundamental issue is how resolute white workers *are* in their commitment to black equality. Phelps insists Shachtman did not appreciate the depths of white racism and the Left's failures, and this blind spot inhibited fundamentally his entire orientation. But that deficiency could of course be rectified by implementing a program with a particular accent on white workers and the revolutionary Left making black equality an absolute priority in the struggle for socialism.

There is no doubt that the meaning of "Equal Rights for Negroes Everywhere" that the Communist Party emblazoned on its 1932 "Vote Communist" election posters, which also shouted through a mapping of the Black Belt Nation, and the proclamation, "Self-Determination," has changed over the last seven decades and more. Shachtman's programmatic statement, which he developed out of a political reading of the class and race struggles of his time, a relentless scrutiny of the main contours of American history's rigid drawing of "the colour line," and a withering demolition of the facts, logic, and political consequences of a particular Stalinist policy that turned on an axis of good/bad nationalism (especially the imprecision and shifting nature of the territorial boundaries and population composition of the Black Belt nation) may look "unyielding" to eyes shielded from the revolutionary possibility that seemed more attainable in 1933 than it does now. As Foley has suggested, that same radically transformative alternative was equally alive in 1919. In exploring why the promise of these earlier periods was not realized, the centrality of race in the revolutionary project is undeniable. Foley, Phelps, and the Shachtman of 1933 have done much to make that evident, and pushed all of those who take seriously the class and race issues of today to think them through in light of a different, but related, past.

Capital & Class On-line Archive

Over 25 years of Marxist theory and analysis of capital and class struggle now available on-line

From January 2004 subscribing to *Capital & Class* includes access to the electronic archive:

- Three issues per year
- Entire back catalogue of *Capital & Class* articles from 1977 to present day
- Unlimited access for subscribers
- Easy to use search engine. Search the full text of over 1400 articles
- Access to over 700 book reviews
- High quality printable pdf files, maintained directly by CSE
- A say in policy matters
- All for £25 per year for an individual full rate subscription

Capital & Class offers a Marxist critique of global capitalism, analysing the important political, economic and social developments of our time. Applying a materialist framework unconstrained by divisions into economics, politics, sociology or history.

Every issue includes Behind the News, indepth articles, polemics and book reviews.

Since 1977 *Capital & Class* has been published three times a year, reaching out into the labour, trade union and other radical movements such as anti-racism, environmentalism and feminism. The new internet archive is an important development in *Capital & Class*'s contribution to Marxist scholarship.

www.cseweb.org.uk