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# MARXISM AND BLACK RADICALISM IN AMERICA:

## The Communist Party Experience

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# MARXISM & BLACK RADICALISM IN AMERICA: NOTES ON A LONG (and continuing) JOURNEY

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At no time in modern history have revolutionaries been faced with a more-complicated problem of self-definition than in contemporary America. The New Left has grown, developed, and divided in the midst of enormous cultural and economic changes. Traditional notions of what it means to be a revolutionary have had to withstand the shock of a strong and independent black liberation movement, an increasingly powerful women's movement, and now a gay liberation movement, all possessing critiques of Amerikkkan society that speak directly to the anxieties of day-to-day living. In addition, these movements have occurred in the midst of vast shrinkage in the labor market, expansion of political repression, and transformation of mass culture which has made drugs and music a central part of the experience of millions of young people whose parents were wrapped up in work and family life. (1) For those of us caught in the middle of these currents, the experience has been as frightening as it has been liberating. With no stable links to our past, whether through a satisfying family life or through a solid tradition of revolutionary politics and culture, we have been vulnerable to freakouts — ecstatic but self-destructive escapes from the terrors of our daily lives. The Weatherpeople (mostly out of elite universities) and the hundreds of thousands of teen-age junkies (out of poor and working-class families) represent tragically-similar responses to the disintegration of the traditional social patterns — one “political” and collective, the other physical and individualistic. They dramatize a fate that threatens all of us unless we can apply a sense of stability and continuity to the revolutionary changes happening within and around us.

One of the major priorities of the moment is a re-examination of our history. As children of the 1950s, few of us were aware of the forces in our lives which made us radical, or very interested in where they came from. Many of us even seemed happy to be “born free” of the

ideologies of the past, able to build our movement out of the concrete experiences of the present. But when the Amerikkkan crisis reached genocidal potential in the late '60s (in both Vietnam and the ghettos), significant numbers of us embraced traditional Marxism with the same naive abandon with which we had once espoused liberalism or populism. Factional struggles took place over obscure points of Marxist theory in organizations which had once espoused "participatory democracy", and Old Left parties which we had once benignly mocked (the CP, the SWP, and PL) became major forces in the movement. Through the subsequent nightmare of splits, manifestoes, and purges, the dynamism of the mass movement was dissipated and its communal spirit was destroyed. We had learned the hard way the wisdom of an old saying: Those who do not know their history are destined to repeat it.

On no issue was our ignorance of history more destructive than in our efforts to create an alliance between black and white movements. When racial conflict emerged as a major contradiction in American society, black and white radical leaders tried desperately to define a strategy for revolution which took into account the central role of the black liberation struggle. Although much of the discussion dealt with contemporary events, the theoretical issues, especially in the white movement, were defined by Marxist-Leninist rhetoric that had not been seriously aired in America for over 15 years. Leaders of SDS factions, many of whom knew little or nothing of black history or culture, offered confident and competing versions of the "correct line" on the black struggle, based on the pronouncements of Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin. While black students rebelled, black ghettos were aflame, and black revolutionaries were jailed and assassinated, white radicals argued bitterly about whether nationalism was "bourgeois", whether the Black Panthers were the vanguard, whether the white working class was privileged, and whether "self-determination in the black belt" was a viable mass line.

The development of a fresh theoretical approach to this issue is essential. I believe Marxism may be helpful, but only if we recognize that it does not dictate a firm and scientific solution to racial tensions in the revolution, and if we maintain a healthy skepticism about the conclusions of the "theoretical giants". The history of the Left's involvement in the black community, which this essay seeks to summarize, is in large part a tragedy, and its dimensions must be honestly faced. For the barriers dividing black and white in America, both culturally and economically, have been so great and complex that they overwhelmed all efforts to define an effective response in Marxist terms. Whether that failure is inherent in the Marxist method or is a product of its historical misapplications is something of which I am not sure, but it certainly should discourage efforts (particularly by white radicals) to project firm "political lines" on the black struggle. The complexity of this issue must be dealt with and our efforts at theorizing

infused with new flexibility, new humility, and increased understanding of the connections between the cultural and economic dimensions of the revolutionary process.

### Beginnings of a Critique: Marxism and Western Civilization

As Paul Richards points out in a recent article (2), one of the best places to begin examining the tensions between American radicalism and black aspirations is in the life and work of W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois was perhaps the most-important American thinker who was influenced by Marxism, but he remained alienated from Socialist and Communist parties most of his life. From his vantage point in the black community Du Bois saw serious limits in a vision of revolution that made the triumph of the working class and the expropriation of the capitalists its primary objective. In a country where the white working class as well as the rich acted to exclude black people from the mainstream of economic and social life, Du Bois concluded that the revolution had to be directed against capitalism as a civilization, and that "cultural" problems such as racism and the emptiness of life in technological society had to be dealt with as an integral part of the "class struggle".

Du Bois's vision of revolution, much ignored in his time, has recently emerged as a major political force in the non-Western world. Since World War II, a "Third World consciousness" has steadily grown in the former colonies of Europe that borrows much from Marxism, but is extremely critical of the ideology and practice of Western Marxist parties. The major theorists of this awakening (Fanon, Guevara, Césaire, et cetera) call for new theoretical forms to take into account both the peculiarities of colonial class structure and the psychological and cultural disorientation imperialism has imposed. They criticize Marxism for its Western cultural references (3), and project a vision of liberation that sees the restructuring of social relationships and social values as a part of the revolutionary process rather than as an aftermath of the seizure of state power.

The Third World awakening has had reverberations in Black America. Black radical thinkers of all persuasions — from Eldridge Cleaver to LeRoi Jones — have based their politics on a critique of America as a civilization and have called for a new humanism in the struggle for revolutionary change. Whether friendly or hostile to Marxism, they have concluded that revolution must come from the bottom up, and must address itself to the whole of human experience. "Liberation for blacks," Earl Ofari asserts, "will come out of the revolutionary culture, consciousness, and experience of Afro-America." (4)

This total vision of human liberation is not entirely new to Marxism. Marx's early manuscripts deal primarily with the alienation from labor and the loss of organic solidarity as mankind began to progress from communalism. The Communist Manifesto shows the System slashing

brutally through traditional life-styles, twirling humanity around the cash nexus. But from the publication of Capital through World War II, in both theory and practice, this philosophical focus in mainstream Marxism was so subordinated to questions of economic analysis and political strategy that people like Castro and Fanon and Guevara almost seemed to be speaking a new language when they wrote of "revolutionary culture" and "the new man". The alienation of Marxism from its humanistic roots took place with stultifying completeness in the West, and that process is of signal importance in understanding the historic tensions between American Marxism and the black community, and American radical history generally.

The beginnings of this process, I suggest, lie in the interpretations given Marx's and Engels's writings by the late Nineteenth Century Socialist movements. While Capital retained the philosophic framework of the early Marx, the "Marxist" apostles interpreted the expectations of scientific and material progress in such a way as to blunt Marx's critical edge. Such optimism was particularly paralyzing in the context of the increasing subjugation of the non-white peoples by European Imperialism. Thus, even by the 1870s, Socialists neglected the inner content of Marxist methods, seeing Marxism as a newer and more precise formula for understanding life than bourgeois economics or sociology. It was the pinnacle of rationalism, a philosophy that would bring the then-dominant civilization of the West to its highest stage and make the principles of science the dynamic of daily life, because it was the philosophy of a class (the proletariat) which had lost all illusions. Thus Marxism took hold in the universities and in the minds of skilled workmen (especially in Germany) as a civilizing philosophy — as the civilizing mission of the working class. Few asked: "Whose standards of civilization?"

But Du Bois asked that question. There was no man of his era more committed to integrating scientific reasoning and modern technology with the struggle of the dispossessed. (5) But he felt acutely ill at ease in the company of most American Socialists. Not only was he disturbed by their ignorance of conditions in the black community and by their glorification of white workers who were filled with race hate, but he was uncomfortable with their economism — their tendency to reduce everything to a dynamic of economic growth and progress and their placid acceptance of middle-class standards of social and cultural life. Beneath their rhetoric of class struggle, most Socialist Party leaders accepted the political and economic hegemony of whites over non-white peoples, and the cultural superiority of white workers and farmers to the black American peasantry.

Some American socialists, to be fair, did show capacity for growth on this issue. As large numbers of blacks began to enter the industrial work force during World War I, the discussion of the race issue began to increase in the socialist press, and a few far-sighted spokesmen

(L. C. Fraina, I. M. Rubinow, W. E. Walling) began to demand a special organizing drive in the black community. (6) But the level of their discussion still did not often cut beneath the "economism" of their more-racist predecessors: They generally advocated the organization of black workers out of necessity to the labor movement. (Otherwise the black workers would break strikes.) No white socialist followed up DuBois's seminal suggestion that the alienation of blacks from white American culture represented a positive phenomenon — that black people could make a significant contribution to revolutionary struggle by humanizing the process of technological growth and helping control the materialism that seemed inherent in Western culture (including Marxism). The few intellectuals on the fringe of the socialist movement who had a consciousness of black culture marked the whole phenomenon off as exotic — thereby absolving themselves of any responsibility to integrate it into the class struggle. Within their version of American Marxism was little questioning of the traditional Western conception that art and culture were entertaining rather than organic to social life.

The destruction of Debsian Socialism through government repression and internal splits ended even the potentiality of Debsian Socialism as a mass movement to deal with Negro problems. For more than a decade after 1919 the American radical movement consisted substantially of two small, isolated organizations, the Socialists and the Communists. Yet the formation of a different ethnic mixture within Communist ranks — Eastern European and particularly Jewish groups rather than the original basically old-immigrant Socialist base of strength — probably promoted the likelihood of Left radical understanding.

### Enter the Communists

The Russian Communists and their American followers pushed the racial confrontation within Marxism to a considerably-higher level. Impressed by Marcus Garvey's ability to mobilize millions of blacks and by their own experience in winning subject nationalities to the Russian Revolution, Comintern leaders concluded that any revolution in America had to come to terms with the black community's race pride and sense of nationhood, and suggested to their American supporters that they give the organization of blacks top priority. This suggestion was strongly reinforced by Lenin's analysis of Imperialism as the major reason for the persistence of capitalism — a perspective which elevated the colonial struggle for national independence (that is to say, for self-determination) to a level of importance almost equal to that of the class struggle of the European proletariat. The American Party initiated from its inception a discussion of the race problem which placed the American black community in the center of a world-wide stage as both a key to the American revolution and a potential source of leadership for independence movements in Africa.

But there were enormous tensions and ambiguities that underlay the Communist emphasis on the black liberation struggle. The initiative for the Communist perspective came from the Comintern and a small group of black intellectuals who had become involved with it: Cyril Briggs, Harry Haywood, Otto Huiswood, and Claude MacKay. (7) The majority of white American communists went along with it not because they really approved it or even understood it, but because their Russian heroes had insisted on it. Their relationship with black "communists", who had come to the Party out of dissatisfaction with Garveyism and their own inability to create a viable movement, was often very tense, as both groups carried hostilities of a racially-polarized society. (8) At a time when black and white workers were locked in bloody race riots, when the dynamic of racial exclusion and strike breaking had crippled the industrial labor movement, and when millions of people were joining the Garvey movement and the Ku Klux Klan, the Comintern emerged as the arbiter of black-white unity in the American Party since it was the only group respected by revolutionaries of both races.

The tragic qualities inherent in this relationship were not visible immediately to any of the participants. Given their lack of intimate knowledge of American life, the Russians played their role as racial intermediaries with considerable tact. Men like Claude MacKay — independent-minded black thinkers with no sentimentality about whites — found the Soviet leaders extremely sensitive to their analysis of the black situation and remarkably unpaternalistic. (9) But unbeknownst to them (or to most American communists) the Russian Revolution was transforming itself in a manner that would drastically reduce its flexibility on this and other issues. With the failure of the Revolution to spread to Europe, the economic crisis, and the growing restlessness of "unconverted classes" in Russian society, the Russian leaders gradually turned the Comintern from a vehicle to encourage indigenous revolutionary movements into a centralized instrument to protect the Soviet Union from capitalist aggression and internal revolt. And as it adjusted to this role, it became more hierarchical in structure, more secretive, and more willing to turn any analytical insight into formula. Insecure in their positions, the Soviet leaders wanted basic policy decisions to be made from the top down, and wanted to have all local strategic perspectives checked against Soviet national interests.

The ascendancy of Stalin greatly accelerated this trend toward formalism. As he solidified his personal dictatorship, Stalin turned Marxist ideology into a parody of bourgeois science. Party programs were no longer the experimental products of discussion and practice, but scientific formulas not to be questioned by the rank and file. (10) The Soviet position on the "Negro Question" followed this same pattern. Between 1926 and 1928, the dialogue on race gradually turned into a monologue concluding with Stalin's proclamation that blacks in America composed an oppressed nation which had the right to self-determination

within the Southern "black belt". This position was proclaimed as the summation of years of study, and to challenge it was to question the "scientific validity" of the thought of Marx and Lenin and their newest interpreter, Comrade Stalin.

This new analysis was accepted by the American Communist Party with surprisingly-little opposition, because members hoped it would provide a new source of energy. For although the Party's work among blacks had been successful by Socialist standards (having attracted perhaps 500 black members via the American Negro Labor Congress), it had failed dismally to compete with Garvey for the allegiance of the black urban population. The Party's efforts to link black nationalism to working-class solidarity seemed awkward and mechanical at a time when capitalism was thriving and most labor unions excluded blacks, and its black cadre failed completely to touch the sources of black alienation that Garvey had successfully tapped. To most black people, the Party remained a curiosity, describing their sufferings and their aspirations in a language they failed to understand. As Saint Clair Drake described it:

Throughout the 1920s, the Black Metropolis had been hearing voices talking to the Negro people, voices that spoke strange words: proletarian, bourgeois, class struggle, revolution. They heard the old-line Negro politicians castigated as misleaders and reformists. They saw white men and women standing on street corners with Negro "comrades" handing out newspapers and leaflets that denounced the "fire traps" and "rent hogs" in Northern black belts.... They had a slogan "Black and White Unite!"....(11)

The Party's position on "self-determination in the black belt" did little to increase its mass appeal. The elaboration of a scientific base for black independence left most black people cold, since it said nothing about their day-to-day lives in a racist society. They had followed Garvey, according to CLR James, not because of the logic of Garvey's political theory, but because of a deep-seated desire to "support their own movement" and organize free of the domination of whites. (12) Garvey's genius lay in his ability to dramatize the historic mission of the African peoples, awaken feelings of black pride, and create an enormous framework of activities which put messages such as these into practice. His churches and fraternal orders, his cultural centers and business enterprises, his periodic parades and festivals, and his mass circulation newspaper The Negro World (none of which have been adequately treated by historians) brought motion, enlightenment, and pride into the drudgery of a segregated world. The Communists were totally unable to inspire the same "amazing energy and will to uplift" in black people. (13) Garvey touched something in the black experience

which lay beyond the terms of their analysis, and which the current generation of historians or radicals has yet to satisfactorily explain.

In their own way, however, the Communists were to make a decisive impact on black life. The group of black people they recruited prior to the Depression was small, but it included a number of exceptionally talented people. Cyril Briggs, Harry Haywood, Richard Moore, George Padmore, and William Patterson were brilliant theorists and publicists who joined the Communist Party in the 1920s. Their work helped set the stage for the Party's rapid growth during the Depression, when it emerged as the major political influence on the black intelligentsia.

This linkage between black intellectuals and the Communist Party has been bitterly criticized by Harold Cruse in The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual. Cruse argues persuasively that the participation of blacks in the Communist movement represented escape from responsibilities of group leadership, and that the Party's "integrationist ideology" cut black intellectuals off from the kind of community base that would have given them genuine social power. But Cruse underestimates the complexity of the black intellectual's dilemma. Bluntly put, there were problems in the black community to which neither Garvey nor Booker T. Washington and his successors addressed themselves, and which the Communists took up. Such issues were the isolation of black people from the labor movement — a significant source of power in America; the continuation of a discriminatory system of segregation in politics, education, and all areas of social life; and the involvement of millions of black people in a plantation economy that kept them in a state of extreme economic and psychological dependency. If the black community needed unity and solidarity (as Garvey sensed), it also needed to break free of the isolation imposed by Jim Crow and plantation agriculture and enter the mainstream of modern industrial life. In the Communist Party's formative years, its appeal to black intellectuals was that of a force for modernization — an appeal that was reinforced by the Soviet experience in developing a backward country. Langston Hughes's comments on the economic and social progress he observed in the colored Soviet republics of Central Asia are quite revealing:

....I visited several cotton kolkhozes, I studied charts, and I looked at statistics. The figures I've forgotten, but I shall always recall what the natives themselves told me: "Before, there were no schools for Uzbek children — now there are. Before, women were bought and sold — now no more. Before, the land and water belonged to the beys — today they are ours, and we share the cotton." (14)

One does not require much imagination to see the relevance of this experience (even if it were only partially true) to conditions of black sharecroppers in the American South.

However, the "modernizing" quality of life in the Communist Party offered black people opportunities to expand their horizons and make use of their talents in a way that went far beyond the normal range of possibilities in segregated America. An able black recruit would be encouraged to travel to other countries, write for Party publications, participate in Party study groups, and speak before integrated Party gatherings. There was an integrated "social life" which accompanied this activity, for the Party practiced "social equality" probably more than any other organization in America. But just as this experience could broaden a person's horizons it could also tend to set up a barrier between the person who went through it and the mass of black people who still lived under rigid segregation. Party ideology sometimes encouraged such a separation. There was a tendency for black and white Party leaders to see the mass of blacks as a "backward people" in need of socialism's enlightening influence. Moreover, the Party's assumption of the mantle of "science and progress" encouraged a highly-uncritical attitude toward Party doctrine by those who became involved with it. Angelo Herndon's description of the Party's impact on him sounds much like a religious conversion:

The education I longed for in the world and expected to find in it I surprisingly began to receive in my Communist circles. To the everlasting glory of the Communist movement, may it be said that wherever it is active, it brings enlightenment and culture . . . Life had robbed me of my innocence and illusions, but I had found something even more satisfying — a realistic recognition of the world and the rational plan of scientific socialism with which to create order and harmony out of the human chaos. (15)

Black recruits were not the only ones affected this way. White leader George Charney looked back on his Party experience as a search for "a new spiritual center . . . more enthralling than any in the past since faith and science, deemed incompatible by the traditional church, were now finally and inextricably fused in the Marxist world-view." (16) But for black intellectuals, such experience had particularly-alienating possibilities. When Herndon spoke of how

My new white friends . . . gave me courage and inspiration to look at the radiant future . . . The bitterness and hatred which I formerly felt toward all white people was now transformed into love and understanding. Like a man who had gone through some terrible sickness of the soul, I mysteriously became whole again.

he was projecting a vision of racial brotherhood that had roots in black

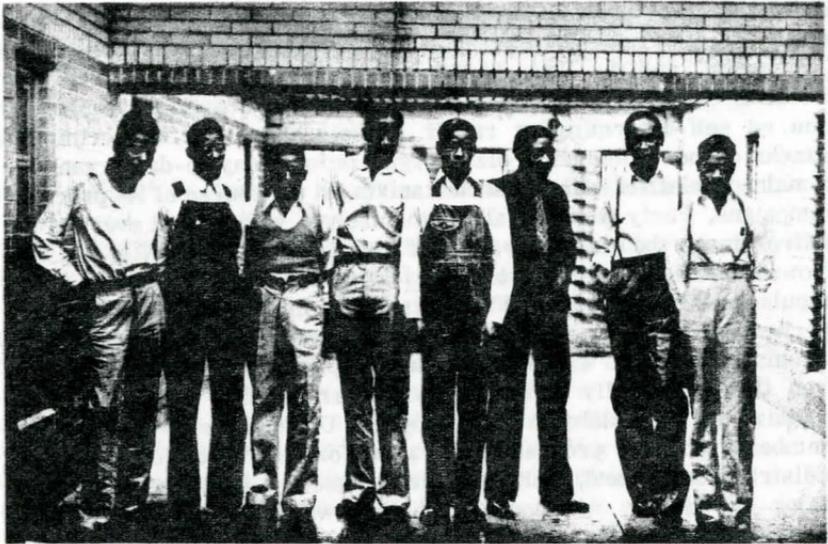
culture (for example the appeal of Martin Luther King) but was simply unrealistic for most black people in a racist society. (17) Cruse is thus correct to suggest that the Party drew black intellectuals into a social and cultural milieu that was remote from the nationalist dynamic of black life. Its modernizing ideology did seem to be accompanied by an assimilationist, Westernizing psychology.

#### The Onset of the Depression: Relevance and Power

The integrationist quality of the Communist Party's internal life did not prevent it from playing a major role in the black community during the early years of the Depression. When the economic crisis drove millions of blacks to the edge of starvation, the Party's theoretical clumsiness seemed less important than the effectiveness of the Party organizers in helping people to survive. For if Garvey's genius was as a publicist of race pride and black self-sufficiency, the Communist genius lay in the organization of mass protest. The Party's cadres were small, but they were highly disciplined and had unique experience in organizing across racial lines. In almost every city in which there was a large black community — Atlanta, Birmingham, Detroit, Chicago, Richmond, New York — black and white communist organizers went to the black unemployed, organized them into unemployed councils, and fought to get them on relief. Spouting a strange ideology that combined "black and white unite and fight" with "self-determination in the black belt", the communists startled civic authorities by bringing thousands of people into the streets and crossing racial boundaries in both North and South. For the Communists not only organized blacks, but also brought whites into the same mass organizations without sacrificing a public commitment to racial equality. Young Angelo Herndon was stunned when he attended an interracial meeting of the unemployed league in Birmingham, Alabama (!!!) and heard a white organizer tell those assembled why he believed in social equality:

You have been told that Reds are dirty foreigners and nigger lovers, but why have you come to this meeting today? Is it because you have been told that you must love somebody, or is it because of your desire to improve your living conditions? That's why we Reds fight for political, economic, and social equality for Negroes: not because we must hypocritically express our love for anyone, but because the bosses have our backs against the wall and all of us alike will be threatened with the same danger of pestilence, hunger, untold misery. (18)

The Party's willingness to challenge white racism in the course of its mass organizing left a deep impression on many black people. Herndon told his friend: "He's right. He does nothing but tell the truth. He's the



Eight of the nine Scottsboro Boys

first honest white man I've ever seen. (19)

The Communists reinforced this initial feeling of trust in Black America with their legal defense work, particularly their handling of the Scottsboro Case. While much has been written about how the Communists "used" the Scottsboro Boys and their parents, my own interviews with people active at the time suggest that the Communists' handling of this case did more than any other single event to make them respected by black working people. (20) The Communists not only organized rallies throughout the black community, but also brought thousands of white workers and intellectuals out in defense of the Scottsboro Boys and made the case a subject of world-wide indignation. According to Adam Clayton Powell, this had a decisive impact. It was the first time since Populism that masses of white people showed their willingness to demonstrate to protect a black victim of injustice: "Coming at the very beginning of the Depression, it served as a great bulwark to hold the hungry, poverty-stricken mass together. (21) It gave concrete meaning to Communist appeals for black-white unity and brought thousands of black people into Party circles (if not actual Party membership) in large Northern cities.

Through 1934 the Communist Party expanded this popular base. It linked its work with the unemployed leagues with massive campaigns to protect evicted tenants and victims of police brutality. It began a major cultural program in Black America, publishing a newspaper

known as the Negro Liberator, encouraging young black writers to write for its impressive array of publications (the New Masses, the Communist, and the Daily Worker), and combining artistic events in the black community with its politics. Although it continued to push its line on self-determination rather crudely along with indiscriminate attacks on non-communist black organizations, day-to-day organizing remained relatively free of sectarianism. In the course of its practical campaigns, Party workers allied themselves with almost every group active among the black poor, from Father Divine to the UNIA, and also showed themselves willing to follow as well as lead the revolutionary impulses of black people. When Party organizers around the Southern Worker received a letter from a group of black sharecroppers in Alabama threatened with eviction, they helped them to organize a union even though virtually no white tenants were willing to join. (22) This organization, the Alabama Sharecroppers Union, enlisted almost 5,000 members around a program that called for extensive Federal relief, redistribution of land, and total racial equality. It engaged in several major gun battles with local authorities which were instrumental in publicizing the crisis in cotton agriculture and the growing militancy of the black tenant farmer. Such activity, generated by local conditions, was symbolic of the Party's work in the early years of the Depression; black and white organizers recall a climate of deep emotionalism and a relationship with the people marked by mutual respect.

By 1935, however, forces at work in the Party were to undermine much of this organizing. Russian leaders concerned about the growing fascist threat to their security instructed national CPs to subordinate their revolutionary appeals to the building of an alliance with social democrats (the United Front) and the liberal wing of the bourgeoisie (the Popular Front). American Communists campaigned against Landon in 1936, or in effect for Franklin Roosevelt; and before the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939, they enthusiastically supported New Deal anti-fascist or "progressive" measures at home and abroad.

In the black sections of the Party, this shift was reflected in an effort to tone down the "nationalist" elements in the Party's organizing. The Southern work of the Party, which had appealed primarily to black people, was significantly played down: The Sharecroppers Union was disbanded because it posed the threat of a race war, and its members were encouraged to join the more-interracial National Farmers Union. (23) In the North the Negro Liberator was discontinued as a paper, and Party workers were instructed to present themselves to the community primarily through the regular Party publications. And organizers in all parts of the country were told to make sure that whites were present in all meetings and demonstrations in the black community and in all black organizations in which the Party had influence. (24)

These changes did not immediately cut the Party's black following, but they helped change its base. Whereas in the early years of the

Depression the Party consciously geared its appeal to the poor and alienated in Black America, the Popular Front Party made its primary appeal to the (professional) black middle class and the stable working class, subordinating revolutionary principles to a vision of assimilation and reform.

### The People's Front in Harlem: Struggle with the Nationalists

From 1935 to 1939, the Party's work in the black community closely paralleled its efforts to form a responsible Left wing of the New Deal. Within the Harlem community, which Party leaders viewed as the key to black-white unity, Party leaders helped to organize a "reform" electoral coalition which linked the black community to its Irish, Italian, and Puerto Rican neighbors. The major product of this activity, the Harlem Legislative Conference, functioned as a mediator between the often-hostile neighborhoods and helped elect Vito Marcantonio and Adam Clayton Powell to office. It took strong stands on many important community problems, issuing demands for more black schools and more black teachers, better recreation facilities, more public housing, and an end to police brutality. (25)

The Party's activity in the field of labor also reflected its politics of coalition and interracial unity. Throughout the middle and late 1930s the Party was engaged in a bitter struggle with local nationalists over the direction of the "Jobs for Negroes" campaign that the nationalists had initiated. This activity, begun by Sufi Abdul Hamid in 1934, focused on the numerous stores in Harlem that refused to hire blacks. It had won much support among unemployed youth and had brought a great deal of latent anti-white and anti-Jewish feeling to the surface. After spending a great deal of energy trying to discredit the movement... labeling Sufi Abdul Hamid a Harlem Hitler... the Party finally launched a competing campaign which directed its energies mainly against large enterprises rather than small merchants. Allying itself with a number of influential journalists and ministers (including Adam Clayton Powell) the Party tied its job campaign to the organizing drive of the CIO. The campaign won a dramatic victory when Powell and Transit Workers Union head Mike Quill forced the Fifth Avenue Bus Company to hire Negro drivers. (27)

The local nationalists, however, were not easily discouraged. Some of the stores conceded to their demands, and they united into a single body called the Harlem Labor Union (which still exists) to continue to apply pressure. The ideological war with the Party persisted, with the nationalists attacking the CIO as a "white union" which refused to upgrade black workers, and the Party calling the Harlem group a bunch of "labor racketeers". (Both charges contained an element of truth. (28)) Each group finally established its own domain, with the nationalists organizing the small stores which the CIO disdained, and the Party

trade unionists organizing the larger enterprises. "Negro-Labor Unity" had thus been maintained, but on a rather-limited basis. The Party's labor allies had no place for the thousands of unemployed and marginal black laborers who could not be organized within the framework of an industrial union. (29) Culturally isolated from white society, disdained by the Left as being unorganizable, they remained a fertile base for nationalist agitation. (30)

In the course of these conflicts (described in depth by Claude MacKay in Harlem, Negro Metropolis), the Party maintained an excellent reputation with "respectable" people in the Harlem community. The Harlem section had several thousand members in the late 1930s and was able to hold its meetings in the most-prominent churches and assembly halls. (31) Whites were active in all section affairs, and their presence generated both enthusiasm and tension. Many of the more educated blacks, according to MacKay, welcomed the "integration". They saw it as living rejection of Jim Crow. But the mass of the black people were more suspicious. One white organizer recalled that he "could never walk the streets of Harlem as if it were my community or stand on the outskirts of a meeting as another member of the throng ....I could speak from a platform with passion and feel momentarily a part of the people; but once the meeting was over, the sense of unease returned....I could sense the glowering looks, the suspicion, the crowding of hostile faces." (32) The Party's insistence on the presence of whites in black community organizations (such as the black caucus in the Federal Writers Project) kept this tension alive, as did the large number of interracial marriages (black man, white woman) among the section leadership. (33) Claude MacKay spoke for a good many poorer Harlemites when he complained that "Negro intellectuals imagine that they can escape the problems of their group by joining the whites as individuals." (34)

The Popular Front Party in Harlem thus had a mixed record. Its coalition for reform did achieve results: Blacks were organized into new unions and found openings in new job categories; reform candidates were elected to office; new schools and playgrounds were constructed; and progress was made in integrating blacks in city government. These gains produced substantial gains in black membership. But when one balances this against the Party's campaign to discourage independent black organization and its failure to organize the most-alienated and most-potentially-revolutionary people in the community, one realizes how far even the best Party work came from meeting the community's needs. MacKay's summary of Party faults was apt and prophetic: "Communists and Socialists prefer to agitate about Segregation and Race Prejudice in General...and avoid the fundamental issue...the stupendous task of engineering new jobs for Negroes....It is this realization that has given form and drive to the comparatively-recent movement of the Negro people toward greater self-development and

community autonomy." (35)

### The Destruction of the People's Front: Party Organizations and the Approaching War

The Popular Front policy, with both its limits and its achievements, proved to be the high point of Party influence in Black America. As the war in Europe approached, international questions intruded on Party organizing in a highly-destructive way. The Party's dependence on the Soviet Union proved to be so deeply rooted and so mechanical that it allowed two of its most-significant Popular Front projects in the black community — its campaign against the Ethiopian invasion and its work in the National Negro Congress — to be undermined by the direct imposition of Russian diplomatic imperatives.

The Ethiopian Crisis was one of the most-decisive examples of the incompatibility of American Communist practice with black nationalist aspirations. When Italy invaded Ethiopia, blacks in the American Communist Party saw an excellent opportunity to mobilize anti-fascist sentiment in the black community. James Ford made a speech at the Seventh Party Congress (1935) suggesting that the Party place its top priority on organizing against the Ethiopian invasion because it had aroused more emotion among Negroes than any event in his memory. (36) What Ford didn't know, however (one hopes), was that the Soviet Union was selling guns and supplies to Italy at less than market prices. As the CP plunged into demonstrations through the United Aid to Ethiopia Committee, it was embarrassed by this disclosure at the same time that it was fighting with local nationalists about whether whites should be in the Committee parades. Worse yet, only one year after it had campaigned against sending Negro troops to fight against Italy in Ethiopia on the grounds that their energies could be better used in America (37) it was actively recruiting Negro soldiers for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spain. Such actions left many principled nationalists (such as George Padmore) with the feeling that the struggle against European imperialism was only a secondary Communist priority. In 1939, CLR James found many radicals in Harlem "individually and in the mass profoundly suspicious of whites. The CP Negroes are looked on as touts for Negro converts in exactly the same way the Democratic and Republican Parties have touts for Negro votes." (38)

In their long-term significance, however, the Party's unprincipled actions within the National Negro Congress, the major focus of its black organizing nationwide from 1926 through 1939, far outweighed the Ethiopian Affair. The Congress had been organized by a group of black intellectuals at Howard University who believed that existing organizations in the black community (the NAACP, the Urban League) failed to represent the interests of black workers or the black rural population, and had underestimated the significance of the labor

movement as a vehicle of black advancement. (39) They called together a broad coalition of groups in the black community — including heads of fraternal organizations, ministers, editors, representatives of farm and labor organizations, and members of radical parties — to create the new organization. Within this coalition the Communists, who brought white representatives as well as black, emerged as the most-powerful group. They saw this as the perfect opportunity to put their Popular Front politics to work by unifying the more-“enlightened” sections of the black bourgeoisie with radical forces in the black working class and the labor movement.

During the first three years of the National Negro Congress, the Communists played at least a partially-constructive role. Although they failed to encourage the Congress to become a critical, autonomous force within the working class and the Left, they did prove effective in getting large segments of the black community to work closely with the CIO. The Congress held conferences of black union members in Chicago, Detroit, and Pittsburgh at which black clergymen, social workers, and politicians joined with CIO leaders to develop a working relationship between labor and the Negro movement. (40) Conferences like these, virtually unprecedented in American history (in which black labor and black community leadership were traditionally at odds with one another), helped pave the way for the organization of black workers in the major industrial unions and were a training ground for developing black trade-union leadership. Yet the Party's success in forging such connections between two once-hostile leadership groups reflected its effectiveness as a machine for reform rather than as a genuine social movement. The Congress did not develop any educational or cultural programs that reached the mass of black people, and it largely ignored the possibilities for black co-operative action in the South and in the ghettos. (41) Like most Party work in that period, it appealed less to the majority of black workers who lay beyond the pale of industrial unionism (sharecroppers, domestics, service workers, day laborers, the unemployed) than it did to black intellectuals and the minority of black workers in the mainstream of the industrial economy.

Nevertheless, the National Negro Congress deserved far better treatment than it received at Party hands during its 1939 meeting. As part of a campaign to justify the Nazi - Soviet Pact, black and white Party members packed the Congress and tried to unite the group behind a massive denunciation of Roosevelt's war preparations and of British and French imperialism. Criticizing all who suggested that there were issues of more relevance to the black community to be discussed, they railroaded their positions through the conferences and told the minority that they could conform or leave. Although their reflections concerning imperialism were not completely off-base, their selective failure to mention Nazi imperial aims and their use of Party whites to influence Congress policy made it clear that the Party would destroy any black

organization it was in as soon as the organization threatened to function independently of immediate Soviet interests. Most independents in the Congress, including President A. Philip Randolph, left in disgust, and the Congress quickly lost its credibility and influence.

### Decline and Fall

From this point on, the Party's Negro work steadily degenerated. Throughout World War II, at a time when the black community was mounting a massive campaign against all forms of discrimination, the Party tried to tone down protest for the sake of "national unity". By polemicizing against the March on Washington Movement, soft-pedaling protest against Jim Crow in the Army, denouncing participants in the Harlem rebellion of 1943 as "fifth columnists", and trying to break strikes and discourage the formation of independent black caucuses in the labor movement, the Party decisively cut itself off from the major currents of militancy in Black America. In 1946, Party leader Royce Wilkerson sadly concluded that the Party had been guilty of "rank opportunism" on the Negro question and had lost much of its black following:

Tens of thousands of Negroes who instinctively rejected our illusions remained entirely without our influence. And many thousands of those who entered our ranks failed to find the answers they sought and thereupon produced the "fluctuating Negro membership problem" which practically all districts report. (42)

The Party's power in the black community did not immediately vanish. In spite of its history, the organization continued to attract black intellectuals and notables into its orbit. Party spokesman Benjamin Davis was elected to the New York City Council from Harlem in 1943, and the Party's legislative coalition in that community lasted well into the late 1940s. The Party press maintained an active discussion of the Negro question; Party scholars did some pioneering research in black history; and Party members played an influential (if not always healthy) role in black activity in the arts. With the media and the universities still shut to black people, the Party was able to enlist the energies of some extremely-talented and extremely-independent-minded people, from an aging and crusty W.E.B. DuBois to a young and ambitious Harold Cruse. Thoroughly middle-class in its membership and appeal, it became a weird amalgam of a political machine, a temporary home for black rebels, and a training ground for the black elite.

This persistence raises some difficult questions. Why did people of undeniable seriousness and ability — such as Benjamin Davis, William Patterson, and Paul Robeson — remain committed to such an unreliable

political instrument? Much of the answer lay in the uniquely-insulating qualities of Party leadership. Those who rose in the ranks, according to George Charney, tended to gradually transfer their allegiance from the "people" to the Party and lose their ability to distinguish between their moral commitments and their enjoyment of power. The Party's "possessive" social world enmeshed their lives to the point at which "every judgment on every question, from high politics to family matters, issued from this source". (43) For black Party leaders, this attachment may have been especially intense because it involved a recognition of their abilities that had been so much denied them in the outside world. "In what other organization, political or otherwise," Abner Berry wrote in 1938, "is a Negro entrusted with the job of shaping basic principles and policies? In what other Party is a Negro elected an authoritative spokesman on general problems? It is well known that even when Negroes serve in executive capacities in non-Communist organizations, they are at best considered specialists in the limited field of race relations, and not leading individuals in molding fundamental programs and tactics." (44) To its black leaders and supporters, the post-war Party retained the sentimental appeal of its pioneering struggles against racism and its steady and often-unpopular commitment to "social equality". Their speeches referred to it as the "Grand Old Party" and the "Champion Fighter for Negro Rights".

But the question of political alternatives also was important. For all the limitations of the Party, where else could a radical black intellectual go in post-war America? The Trotskyist movement was critical and independent, but had much of the ideological rigidity of the CP, without its organizational power. The nationalist groups were close to the black community, but were fragmented, parochial in their perspectives, and dominated by religious mysticism. And the black socialists, who had been militant during and immediately after the War, were rapidly turning into "domestic militants" who sought to attain internal political gains by defending American foreign policy. The fates of those black intellectuals who left the Party and sought to remain critical were not very pleasant (for Ralph Ellison, isolation and political ostracism; for Richard Wright, a life in exile). Others with less independence found themselves pressed into testifying before House and Senate committees, becoming informers, or merely sinking into a comfortable bourgeois life in the Affluent Society. It is therefore not entirely surprising that the Party maintained some support even through the early 1950s, since of the political options for black radicals it was probably not the worst.

But all of this had very little to do with the development of a mass revolutionary movement, an autonomous black culture, or a dynamic relationship between black intellectuals and the mass of black people. The issues the Party avoided at the height of its influence — exclusion of millions of blacks from positions in the economy in which organized labor could help them, and alienation of most black people from white

American culture — remained pressing in the 1950s. Even the Party's appeal as the vanguard of reform vanished, as liberals mobilized the power of government, business, and organized labor against legal segregation, and the universities and media offered new opportunities to black intellectuals. By 1959 the Party's influence had become so minimal that only a few noticed its abandonment of the historic line on "self-determination in the black belt", or its weak flicker of approval for the civil-rights movement, for the Democratic Party, and for Walter Reuther.

The black liberation movement of the 1960s thus owed very little to Communist influence. It grew out of the historic well-springs of frustration in Black America that had fed Garvey and Sufi Abdul Hamid, contradictions that had been vastly increased by the disintegration of plantation agriculture, the migration to the cities, and the elimination of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. The Muslims, the black student groups, and the millions of youths involved in ghetto rebellions were moving far beyond the politics of the "Negro-Labor Alliance". They were rebelling against racism, police violence, and the absence of meaningful work. For theoretical guidance, they have looked to writers in both the Third World and their own communities who have struggled to make a connection between the multiple levels of their oppression. At the moment of this writing, they remain divided as well as angry, some of them remaining religiously anti-white, others joining the Black Panthers, others becoming Pan-Africanists, others trying to link black nationalism with labor radicalism, and still others affirming their blackness while trying to "make it" in the System.

This explosion of black energy, with its accompanying theoretical innovation, has been a terrifying phenomenon to whites of orthodox sensibilities. The refusal of the black liberation movement to seize a single formula for revolution has driven significant numbers of white radicals back into the past to seek a "correct line" on the race issue. In the last few years, at least two influential groups (PL and the SDS Labor Committee) have espoused the orthodox communist line on black-white unity, and yet another (RYM II and its spinoffs) has reaffirmed its commitment to self-determination in the black belt.

But the majority of white radicals have fortunately rejected simple solutions. We have looked on the black liberation movement with fear, but have also seen the unfolding of a creative process in which a people are building a revolutionary culture out of the materials of their own experience. The process does not follow a straight line, but we are coming to accept that. For if we have learned anything in this brutal century, it is that revolution/liberation can come only from a process of criticism and growth in which the heritage of revolutionary thought is continuously tested against the reality of our daily lives. A thorough understanding of political economy and the class forces in the struggle is essential, but it can no longer be separated from our vision of total

human liberation. We are talking about building a new civilization, and our objectives must be as sweeping as the oppression that we hope to transcend. As Fanon said:

It is a question...of starting a new history of Man, a history which will have regard to the sometimes-prodigious theses which Europe has put forward, but which will also not forget Europe's crimes, of which the most horrible was committed in the heart of man, and consisted in the pathological tearing away of his unity. And in the framework of the collectivity, there were the differentiations, the stratifications, and the bloodthirsty tensions fed by classes, and finally, on the immense scale of humanity, there were racial hatred, slavery, and exploitation....

So, comrades, let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions, and societies which draw their inspiration from her....

....If we want humanity to advance a step further....then we must invent and make discoveries.

....For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf; we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man. (45)

## Footnotes

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1. There have ever been subcultures in Twentieth Century America which centered around drugs and music (bohemians, jazz musicians, et cetera), but at no time in American history did they cut across class, racial, and ethnic lines as they do today.

2. See Paul Richards: "W. E. B. DuBois and American Social History: The Evolution of a Marxist", Radical America, Volume 4 (November-December 1970).

3. Aime Césaire: Speech at a black writers' conference quoted in Earl Ofari: "Marxism, Nationalism, and Black Liberation", Monthly Review, Volume 22 (March 1971), Page 31.

4. Ofari, op. cit., Pages 32-33.

5. The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois, Pages 205-207. About the time DuBois became a socialist, he was sponsoring social scientific studies of the black population in the South through Atlanta University:

"I was going to study the facts, any and all facts, concerning the Negro and his plight.... I entered this primarily with the utilitarian object of reform and uplift, but nevertheless I wanted to do the work with scientific accuracy."

6. Oakley C. Johnson: "Marxism and the Negro Freedom Struggle: 1876-1917", Journal of Human Relations (Spring 1965), Pages 21-29; Claude MacKay: A Long Way From Home, Pages 41-43. Recruitment of black socialists took place almost exclusively in New York City, on the initiative of Jewish socialists in the garment trades. The first important black recruit was Hubert Harrison, a West Indian whom the socialists "reassigned" from his soapbox on Wall Street to Harlem. Harrison later quit the socialists to become the editor of the Garvey newspaper, The Negro World.

7. See Theodore Draper: American Communism and Soviet Russia, Pages 315-353, for a good discussion of the role that black communists played in the development of the Comintern's position on the Negro question.

8. Speech by Claude MacKay in Fourth Congress of the Communist International Abridged Report, as quoted in "Marxism and the Negro Problem", a discussion article by F. Forest (Raya Dunayevskaya) for the Workers Party, 1949. MacKay warned the Communists to pay more attention to race: "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."

9. MacKay: A Long Way From Home, Pages 206-214; Draper, op. cit., Pages 315-353.

10. See George Charney: A Long Journey (New York, 1968), Pages 31-32, on the stultification of Party ideology.

11. Saint Clair Drake and Horace Cayton: Black Metropolis, Volume 1, Page 86.

12. J. R. Johnson (CLR James): "Preliminary Notes on the Negro Question" (prior to a meeting with Trotsky), May or June 1939, and "Discussion with Trotsky" from the Socialist Workers Party Documents on the Negro Struggle, 1954. James's understanding of the Garvey movement, in my opinion, far surpasses that of any other contemporary historian. Within his letters, speeches, and private memos (of which I have only seen a small amount) lies a wealth of immensely-significant criticism of the American Communist Party's activities in the black community and of the political and philosophical forces behind them. (They should be reprinted as soon as possible.)

13. Claude MacKay: Harlem, Negro Metropolis (New York, 1940), Page 177.

14. Langston Hughes: I Wonder as I Wander, An Autobiographical Journey (New York, 1956), Page 176. Hughes took this trip in 1933-34.

15. Angelo Herndon: Let Me Live, Pages 87-88.
16. Charney: A Long Journey, Page 31.
17. Herndon: Let Me Live, Pages 88-89.
18. Ibid., Pages 76-77.
19. Ibid., Page 77.
20. My personal interviews with black and white radicals active in the Depression, whether Party members or not, all affirm the notable significance of the Scottsboro Case in the formation of a black-white coalition for social reform. This does not mean that manipulation of the Case (financially or morally) was justified, but means only that people perceived it as a pivotal event at the time, and perceived it positively.
21. Adam Clayton Powell, Junior: Marching Blacks, Page 64.
22. Dale Rosen: "The Alabama Sharecroppers Union", Harvard Radcliffe Senior Thesis, Pages 40-56. This essay, completed from interviews as well as traditional sources, is the best source on the Alabama Sharecroppers Union.
23. James: "Preliminary notes on the Negro Question".
24. See Mackay: Harlem, Negro Metropolis, Pages 182-261, for a detailed unfolding of this process.
25. James Ford: The Negro and the Democratic Front, Pages 120-129; Charney: A Long Journey, Pages 105-115.
26. MacKay: Harlem, Negro Metropolis, Pages 198-203.
27. Charney: A Long Journey, Pages 99-100.
28. MacKay: Harlem, Negro Metropolis, Pages 212-216.
29. See Mark Naison: "The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the CIO", Radical America, Volume 2 (September-October 1968) for another example of how CIO organizing strategy failed to meet the needs of a significant segment of the black population, and how the Party tried to undermine independent unionism that existed outside such a framework.
30. MacKay: Harlem, Negro Metropolis, Page 216. The following passage is indicative of the Party's unwillingness to deal with "lumpen" and marginal workers: "Once I mentioned to Mr. Manning Johnson the fact of hundreds of Negroes working in the innumerable coffee shops, sandwich shops, fish and potato shops et cetera in Harlem. Mr. Johnson is a college graduate and an efficient organizer of the cafeteria union, and is prominent in the Communist hierarchy. I said I thought it would help the community if those workers were welded into a General Union of Negroes or some such organization. But at the places I mentioned Mr. Johnson sneered as stink-pots."
31. Interview with Mr. Samuel Coleman, former organizer in the Harlem section.
32. Charney: A Long Journey, Pages 103-104.
33. Charney: A Long Journey, Pages 102-103; MacKay: Harlem, Negro Metropolis, Pages 204, 233-237.
34. MacKay: Harlem, Negro Metropolis, Page 218.

35. *Ibid.*, Pages 197-198.
36. James Ford: "The Struggle for Peace and Independence in Ethiopia", speech delivered at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in Moscow (August 1935) on behalf of the Harlem Section of the Communist Party.
37. James: "Preliminary Notes on the Negro Question", Page 2; James Ford: "Build the People's Labor Party", speech delivered at an emergency meeting of the Harlem Section of the Communist Party (May 5, 1936). Ford's speech describes the trouble the Party has had with its organizing around Ethiopia because local nationalists are violently opposed to having whites in the demonstrations. James (three years later) notes the disillusioning effects of the Ethiopian Affair: "That Russia sold oil to Italy made a disastrous impression on blacks. Yet many Negro Party members remained. What seems to have been a decisive factor was the activity of the CP in regard to Spain. 'Every day it is only Spain, Spain; but nothing was done for Ethiopia except one or two meager processions around Harlem.' . . . The contrast with Spain has been too glaring, and the Negroes became finally conscious that they were once more the dupes of 'another white party'."
38. James: "Preliminary Notes on the Negro Question", Page 4.
39. See Ralph Bunche: "The Programs, Ideologies, Tactics, and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organizations" (unpublished manuscript — Myrdal study), Pages 319-355.
40. See Horace Cayton and George Mitchell: Black Workers and the New Unions, Pages 415-428; and James Ford: The Negro and the Democratic Front, Pages 107-113.
41. MacKay: Harlem: Negro Metropolis, Pages 223-224, 230-232. The Party cracked down on a movement for co-operative enterprises within its own ranks in Harlem, led by a Mrs. Grace Campbell.
42. Speech by Doxey Wilkerson at the plenary meeting of the National Committee of the CPUSA in New York (December 3-5, 1946), Pages 620-621.
43. Charney: A Long Journey, Pages 33, 116-117.
44. Abner Berry: Introduction to James Ford: The Negro and the Democratic Front, Pages 9-10.
45. Frantz Fanon: Wretched of the Earth, Pages 315-316.
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