

# Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American by Harold Cruse (1962)

## Revolutionary Nationalism and Western Marxism

Many of Western Marxism's fundamental theoretical formulations concerning revolution and nationalism are seriously challenged by the Cuban Revolution. American Marxism, which, since World War II, has undergone a progressive loss of influence and prestige, is challenged most profoundly. For while most American Marxists assert that the Cuban Revolution substantiates their theories of nationalism, national liberation and revolution, in fact the Cuban success is more nearly *asuccess de circonstance*. Orthodox Marxists were unable to foresee it, and indeed opposed Castro until the last minute. One would hope that such a development might cause American radicals to re-evaluate their habitual methods of perceiving social realities; but in the spate of written analyses of the Cuban Revolution one looks in vain for a new idea or a fleeting spark of creative theoretical inspiration apropos of the situation in the United States.

The failure of American Marxists to work out a meaningful approach to revolutionary nationalism has special significance for the American Negro. The Negro has a relationship to the dominant culture of the United States similar to that of colonies and semi-dependents to their particular foreign overseers: the Negro is the American problem of underdevelopment. The failure of American Marxists to understand the bond between the Negro and the colonial peoples of the world has led to their failure to develop theories that would be of value to Negroes in the United States.

As far as American Marxists are concerned, it appears that thirty-odd years of failure on the North American mainland are now being offered compensatory vindication "ninety miles from home." With all due respect to the Marxists, however, the hard facts remain. Revolutionary nationalism has not waited for Western Marxian thought to catch up with the realities of the "underdeveloped" world. From underdevelopment itself have come the indigenous schools of theory and practice for achieving independence. The liberation of the colonies before the socialist revolution in the West is not orthodox Marxism (although it might be called Maoism or Castroism). As long as American Marxists cannot deal with the implications of revolutionary nationalism, both abroad and at home, they will continue to play the role of revolutionaries by proxy.

The revolutionary initiative has passed to the colonial world, and in the United States is passing to the Negro, while Western Marxists theorize, temporize and debate. The success of the colonial and semicolonial revolutions is not now, if it ever was, dependent upon the prior success of the Western proletariat. Indeed, the reverse may now be true; namely, that the success of the latter is aided by the weakening of the imperial outposts of Western Capitalism. What is true of the colonial world is also true of the Negro in the United States. Here, the Negro is leading the revolutionary force, independent and ahead of the Marxists in the development of a movement towards social change.

### **The American Negro: A Subject of Domestic Colonialism**

The American Negro shares with colonial peoples many of the socioeconomic factors which form the material basis for present-day revolutionary nationalism. Like the peoples of underdeveloped countries, the Negro suffers in varying degree from hunger, illiteracy, disease, ties to the land, urban and semi-urban slums, cultural starvation, and the psychological reactions to being ruled over by others not of his kind. He experiences the tyranny imposed upon the lives of those who inhabit underdeveloped countries. In the words of a Mexican writer, Enrique Gonzales Pedrero, underdevelopment creates a situation where that which exists "only half exists," where "countries are almost countries, only fifty percent nations, and a man who inhabits these countries is a dependent being, a sub-man." Such a man depends "not on himself but on other men and other outside worlds that order him around, counsel and guide him like a newly born infant."

From the beginning, the American Negro has existed as a colonial being. His enslavement coincided with the colonial expansion of European powers and was nothing more or less than a condition of domestic colonialism. Instead of the United States establishing a colonial empire in Africa, it brought the colonial system home and installed it in the Southern states. When the Civil War broke up the slave system and the Negro was emancipated, he gained only partial freedom. Emancipation elevated him only to the position of a semi-dependent man, not to that of an equal or independent being.

The immense wealth and democratic pretensions of the American way of life have often served to obscure the real conditions under which the eighteen to twenty million Negroes in the United States live. As a wage laborer or tenant farmer, the Negro is discriminated against and

exploited. Those in the educated, professional, and intellectual classes suffer a similar fate. Except for a very small percentage of the Negro intelligentsia, the Negro functions in a subcultural world made up, usually of necessity, of his own race only. This is much more than a problem of racial discrimination; it is a problem of political, economic, cultural and administrative development.

American Marxists, however, have never been able to understand the implications of the Negro' s position in the social structure of the United States. They have no more been able to see the Negro as having revolutionary potentialities in his own right, than European Marxists could see the revolutionary aspirations of their colonials as being independent of, and not subordinate to, their own. As Western Marxism had no adequate revolutionary theory for the colonies, American Marxists have no adequate theory for the Negro. The belief of some American Marxists in a political alliance of Negroes and whites is based on a superficial assessment of the Negro' s social status: the notion that the Negro is an integral part of the American nation in the same way as is the white working class. Although this idea of Negro and white unity is convenient in describing the American multinational and multiracial makeup, it cannot withstand a deeper analysis of the components which make American society what it is.

Negroes have never been equal to whites of any class in economic, social, cultural, or political status, and very few whites of any class have ever regarded them as such. The Negro is not really an integral part of the American nation beyond the convenient formal recognition that he lives within the borders of the United States. From the white' s point of view, the Negro is not related to the "we," the Negro is the "they." This attitude assumes it' s most extreme expression in the Southern states and spreads out over the nation in varying modes of racial mores. The only factor which differentiates the Negro' s status from that of a pure colonial status is that his position is maintained in the "home" country in close proximity to the dominant racial group. It is not at all remarkable then that the semi-colonial status of the Negro has given rise to nationalist movements. It would be surprising if it had not. Although Negro nationalism today is a reflection of the revolutionary nationalism that is changing the world, the present nationalist movement stems from a tradition dating back to the period of World War I.

Negro nationalism came into its own at that time with the appearance of Marcus Garvey and his "Back to Africa" movement. Garvey mobilized large sections of the discontented urban petit-bourgeois and working-class elements from the West Indies and the South into the

greatest mass movement yet achieved in American Negro history. The Garvey movement was revolutionary nationalism being expressed in the very heart of Western capitalism. Despite the obvious parallels to colonial revolutions, however, Marxists of all parties not only rejected Garvey, but have traditionally ostracized Negro nationalism.

American Marxism has neither understood the nature of Negro nationalism, nor dealt with its roots in American society. When the Communists first promulgated the Negro question as a "national question" in 1928, they wanted a national question without nationalism. They posed the question mechanically because they did not really understand it. They relegated the "national" aspects of the Negro question to the "black belt" of the South, despite the fact that Garvey's "national movement" had been organized in 1916 in a northern urban center where the Negro was, according to the Communists, a "national minority," but not a "nation," as he was in the Southern states. Of course, the national character of the Negro has little to do with what part of the country he lives in. Wherever he lives, he is restricted. His national boundaries are the color of his skin, his racial characteristics, and the social conditions within this subcultural world.

The ramifications of the national and colonial question are clear only if the initial bourgeois character of national movements is understood. According to American Marxism, Negro movements do not have "bourgeois nationalist" beginnings. American Marxists have fabricated the term "Negro Liberation Movement" -an "all-class" affair united around a program of civil and political equality, the beginnings of which they approximately date back to the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909. True, the NAACP was, from its inception, and is still, a bourgeois movement. However, it is a distortion to characterize this particular organization as the sole repository of the beginnings of the Negro bourgeois movement. Such a narrow analysis cannot explain how or why there are two divergent trends in Negro life today: pro-integration and anti-integration. That is to say, it does not explain the origins of the nationalist wing, composed of black nationalists, Black Muslims and other minor Negro nationalist grouping, as an outgrowth of basic conflicts within the early bourgeois movements (circa 1900), from which also developed the present day NAACP-Martin Luther King-student coalition. Furthermore, the Marxian version of the NAACP's origins does not explain why the nationalist wing and the NAACP wing oppose each other, or why the overwhelming majority of Negroes are uncommitted to either one. There is widespread dissatisfaction among various classes of Negroes with the NAACP's approach to racial problems. On the other hand, in recent years the nationalists have been

gaining support and prestige among uncommitted Negroes. This is especially true of the Muslims, the newest Negro nationalist phenomenon.

The rise of free African nations and the Cuban Revolution have, without a doubt, stirred up the latent nationalism of many Negroes. The popular acclaim given Fidel Castro by the working class Negroes of Harlem during his visit in the fall of 1960 demonstrated that the effects of the colonial revolutions are reaching the American Negro and arousing his nationalist impulses. Many Negroes, who are neither nationalists nor supporters of the NAACP, are becoming impatient with the NAACP-Martin Luther King-student legalistic and "passive resistance" tactics. They suspect that the long-drawn-out battle of attrition with which the NAACP integration movement is faced may very well end in no more than Pyrrhic victories. They feel that racial integration, as a goal, lacks the tangible objectives needed to bring about genuine equality. After all, social and racial equality remain intangible goals unless they are related to seizure and retention of objectives which can be used as levers to exert political, social, economic, and administrative power in society. Power cannot be wielded from integrated lunch counters, waiting rooms, schools, housing, baseball teams, or love affairs, even though these are social advances.

There emerges from this dilemma a recognizable third trend, personified in the case of Robert F. Williams. Williams was forced to take an anti-NAACP position, but he was not a nationalist and was critical of Marxists. As a rebel, Williams' objectives were the same as those of the NAACP; he differed only in his approach. His seemingly "revolutionary" stance is thwarted by the same lack of substance that makes a program of racial integration unsatisfactory to many Negroes. Williams resorted to arms for defense purposes; but arms are superfluous in terms of the objectives of racial integration, and to the seizure of actual centers of social power. The adherents of this third trend – young social rebels who are followers of Williams' Monroe Movement – are faced with this predicament. They are neither avowed nationalists nor NAACPers. They consider themselves "revolutionary," but do not have revolutionary objectives. However, they are not yet a force, and their future importance will rest, no doubt, upon how much influence the nationalist wing will exert in the Negro community. The main trends in Negro life are becoming more and more polarized around the issues of pro and anti-integration.

### **Integration vs. Separation: History and Interpretation**

Negro historiography does not offer a very clear explanation of how the American Negro has become what he is today. As written, Negro history appears as a parade of lesser and greater personalities against a clamor of many contending anonymous voices and a welter of spasmodic trends all negating each other. Through the pages of Negro history the Negro marches, always arriving but never getting anywhere. His "national goals" are always receding.

Integration vs. separation has become polarized around two main wings of racial ideology, with fateful implications for the Negro movement and the country at large. Yet we are faced with a problem in racial ideology without any means of properly understanding how to deal with it. The dilemma arises from a lack of comprehension of the historical origins of the conflict.

The problem is complicated by a lack of recognition that the conflict even exists. The fundamental economic and cultural issues at stake in this conflict cannot be dealt with by American sociologists for the simple reason that sociologists never admit that such issues should exist at all in American society. They talk of "Americanizing" all the varied racial elements in the United States; but, when it is clear that certain racial elements are not being "Americanized," socially, economically, or culturally, the sociologists proffer nothing but total evasion, or more studies on "the nature of prejudice." Hence problems remain with us in a neglected state of suspension until they break out in what are considered to be "negative," "antisocial," "antiwhite," "antidemocratic" reactions.

One of the few attempts to bring a semblance of order to the dominant trends in the chaos of Negro history was made by Marxist historians in the 1930' s and 1940' s. However, it proved to be a one-sided analysis which failed to examine the class structure of the Negro people. Viewing Negro history as a parade from slavery to socialism, the Marxist historians favor certain Negro personalities uncritically while ignoring others who played vital roles. Major figures, such as Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey, who do not fit into the Communist stereotype of Negro heroes are ignored or downgraded. In the process, Marxist historians have further obscured the roots of the current conflict in racial ideology. Under the aegis of other slogans, issues and rivalries, the pro-integration vs. anti-integration controversy first appeared at the turn of the century in the famous Booker T. Washington-W.E.B. Du Bois debate. Washington' s position was that the Negro had to achieve economic self-sufficiency before demanding his political rights. This position led Washington to take a less "militant" stand on civil rights than did other Negro leaders, such as Du Bois, who accused Washington

of compromising with the racists on the Negro' s political position in the South. It is not sufficient, however, to judge Washington purely on the political policies he advocated for the Negro in the South. For Washington gave voice to an important trend in Negro life, one that made him the most popular leader American Negroes have had. The Washington-Du Bois controversy was not a debate between representatives of reaction and progress, as Communist historians have asserted, but over the correct tactics for the emerging Negro bourgeoisie.

From the Reconstruction era on, the would-be Negro bourgeoisie in the United States confronted unique difficulties quite unlike those experienced by the young bourgeoisie in colonial situations. As a class, the Negro bourgeoisie wanted liberty and equality, but also money, prestige, and political power. How to achieve all this within the American framework was a difficult problem, since the whites had a monopoly on these benefits of Western civilization, and looked upon the new aspirants as interlopers and upstarts. The Negro bourgeoisie was trapped and stymied by the entrenched and expanding power of American capitalism. Unlike the situation in the colonial area, the Negro could not seize the power he wanted nor oust "foreigners." Hence he turned inward toward organizations of fraternal, religious, nationalistic, educational and political natures. There was much frustrated bickering and internal conflict within this new class over strategy and tactics. Finally the issues boiled down to that of politics vs. economics, and emerged in the Washington-Du Bois controversy.

In this context, it is clear that Washington' s program for a "separate" Negro economy was not compatible with the idea of integration into the dominant white economy. In 1907 DuBois complained of Washington that: He is striving nobly to make Negro artisans business men and property-owners; but it is impossible, under modern competitive methods, for working men and property-owners to defend their rights and exist without the right of suffrage. [\*Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, A.C. Mclurg, 1907)]

Yet Washington could not logically seek participation in "white" politics in so far as such politics were a reflection of the mastery of whites in the surrounding economy. He reasoned that since Negroes had no chance to take part in the white world as producers and proprietors, what value was there in seeking political rights immediately? Herbert Aptheker, the leading Marxist authority on Negro history, quotes Washington saying: "Brains, property, and character for the Negro will settle the question of civil rights. The best course to pursue in regard to a civil rights bill in the South is to let it alone; let it alone and it will settle itself. Good school teachers and plenty of money to pay them will be more potent in settling the race

question than many civil rights bills and investigation committees.” [\*E. Davidson Washington, *Selected Speeches of Booker T. Washington*, Doubleday, New York, p.6] This was the typical Washington attitude – a bourgeois attitude, practical and pragmatic, based on the expediencies of the situation. Washington sought to train and develop a new class. He had a longer-range view than most of his contemporaries, and for his plans he wanted racial peace at any cost.

Few of the implications of this can be found in Marxist interpretations of Negro history. By taking a partisan position in favor of Du Bois, Marxists dismiss the economic aspects of the question in favor of purely political. This is the same as saying that the Negro Bourgeoisie had no right to try to become capitalists – an idea that makes no historical sense whatsoever. If a small proprietor, native to an underdeveloped country, should want to oust foreign capitalists and take over his internal markets, why should not the Negro proprietor have the same desire? Of course, a substantial Negro bourgeoisie never developed in the United States. Although this fact obscured and complicated the problems of Negro nationalism, it did not and does not change the principles involved. Washington sought to develop a Negro bourgeoisie. He failed. But his failure was no greater than that of those who sought equality through politics.

Washington’ s role in developing an economic program to counteract the Negro’ s social position is central to the emergence of Negro nationalism, and accounts for much of his popularity among Negroes. Yet Aptheker makes the error of assessing Washington purely on political grounds. On this basis, of course, Aptheker finds him not “revolutionary” or “militant” in the fashion that befits a Negro leader, past or present. He rejects the historic-economic-class basis of Washington’ s philosophy, although these are essential in analyzing social movements, personalities, or historical situations. Aptheker has not seen Washington in the light of what he was: the leading spokesman and theoretician of the new Negro capitalists, whom he was trying to mold into existence. All that Aptheker has to say about Washington is summed up by him as follows: Mr. Washington’ s policy amounted objectively to an acceptance by the Negro of second class citizenship. His appearance on the historical stage and the growth of his influence coincided with and reflected the propertied interests’ resistance to the farmers’ and workers’ great protest movements in the generations spanning the close of the nineteenth and the opening of the twentieth centuries. American imperialism conquers the South during these years and Mr. Washington’ s programs of industrial education, ultra-gradualism and opposition to independent political activity and trade unionism assisted in this conquest.[\*Herbert Aptheker, *A Documentary History of Negro People in the United States* (New York: Citadel Press, 1951)]. Thus is the Marxian scheme about

the “Negro people” projected back into history – a people without classes or differing class interests.

It is naïve to believe that any aspiring member of the bourgeoisie would have been interested in trade-unionism and the political action of farmers. But American Marxists cannot “see” the Negro at all unless he is storming the barricades, either in the present or in history. Does it make any sense to look back into history and expect to find Negroes involved in trade unionism and political action in the most lynch-ridden decade the South has ever known? Anyone reading about the South at the turn of the century must wonder how Negroes managed to survive at all, let alone become involved in political activity when politics was dominated by the Ku Klux Klan. According to Aptheker, however, the Negroes who supported Washington were wrong. It was the handful of Negro militants from above the Mason-Dixon line who had never know slavery, who had never known Southern poverty and illiteracy, the whip of the lynch-mad KKK, or the peasant’ s agony of landlessness, who were correct in their high-sounding idealistic criticism of Washington. These were, Aptheker tells us, within a politically revolutionary tradition – a tradition which in fact had not even emerged when Washington died!

After the Washington-Du Bois debate, Du Bois went on to help form the NAACP in 1909. Washington died in 1915. The controversy continued, however, in the conflict between the NAACP and the Garvey movement.

In 1916, Marcus Garvey, the West Indian-born nationalist, organized his “Back to Africa” movement in the United States. Garvey had, from his earliest years, been deeply influenced by the racial and economic philosophies of Booker T. Washington. Adopting what he wanted from Washington’ s ideas, Garvey carried them further – advocating Negro self-sufficiency in the United States linked, this time, with the idea of regaining access to the African homeland as a basis for constructing a viable black economy. Whereas Washington had earlier chosen an accommodationist position in the South to achieve his objectives, Garvey added the racial ingredient of black nationalism to Washington’ s ideas with potent effect. This development paralleled the bourgeois origins of the colonial revolutions then in their initial stages in Africa and Asia. Coming from a British colony, Garvey had the psychology of a colonial revolutionary and acted as such.

With the rise of nationalism, Du Bois and the NAACP took a strong stand against the Garvey movement and against revolutionary nationalism. The issues were much deeper than mere rivalry between different factions for the leadership of Negro politics. The rise of Garvey

nationalism meant that the NAACP became the accommodationists and the nationalists became the militants. From its very inception, the Negro bourgeois movement found itself deeply split over aims, ideology, and tactics, growing out of its unique position of contending for its aims in the very heart of Western capitalism. Neither the nationalist side of the bourgeois movement nor the reformist NAACP wing, however, were able to vanquish the social barriers facing Negroes in the United States. The Garvey movement found its answer in seeking a way out – “Back to Africa!” where the nationalist revolution had elbow room, where there was land, resources, sovereignty – all that the black man had been denied in the United States.

The Garvey era manifested the most self-conscious expression of nationality in the entire history of the Negro in the United States. To refrain from pointing this out, as Aptheker does in his essays on Negro history, is inexcusable. In his essay, *“The Negro in World War I,”* Aptheker says: “What was the position of the Negro people during the years of Wilson’s ‘New Freedom’?” He then mentions the activities of the NAACP, the National Race Congress of 1915, and the formation in 1915 of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. But in discussing the racial unrest of the time, Aptheker fails to mention the Garvey movement, despite the fact that it had organized more Negroes than any other organization in the three years following its establishment in 1916. The causes for these omissions are, of course, apparent: orthodox Western Marxism cannot incorporate nationalism into its schema.

With the NAACP and the Garvey movement growing apace, the “Negro People” had two “Negro Liberation Movements” to contend with. Never was an oppressed people so richly endowed with leadership; the only difficulty was that these two movements were at bitter odds with one another. Furthermore, within the Negro community, prejudice about lighter and darker skin coloring also served as a basis for class stratification. Thus, when retaliating against Du Bois’ criticisms of his movement, Garvey attacked him on the basis of his skin color, and assailed the assimilationist values of the upper-class Negro leadership. In addition, the Garvey “blacks” and the NAACP “coloreds” disagreed as to which was the true “motherland” – black Africa or white America.

During the period when the Communists looked upon the Negro question as a national question, some Communist writers perceived the positive, as well as the negative, aspects of Garvey’s appeal. Harry Haywood, for example, wrote that the Garvey movement “reflected the widening rift between the policies of the Negro bourgeois reformism and the life and

needs of the sorely pressed people." He sees in Garvey' s "renunciation of the whole program of interracialism" a belief that the upper-class Negro leadership was "motivated solely by their desire of cultural assimilation," and that they "banked their hopes for Negro equality on support from the white enemy." Haywood sympathized with this position, seeing in the "huge movement lead by Garvey" a "deep feeling for the intrinsic national character of the Negro problem."

In 1959, the Communists withdrew the concept of "self-determination" in the black belt, and sidestepped the question of the Negro' s "national character." Instead, they adopted a position essentially the same as that of the NAACP. Their present goal is to secure "with all speed" the "fullest realization of genuinely equal economic, political and social status with all other nationalities and individual citizens of the United States" – this to be accompanied by "genuinely representative government, with proportionate representation in the areas of Negro majority population in the South." This position is essentially no different from that supported by the NAACP.

Thus, it is not surprising that it is difficult to understand the present conflict within the Negro movement; the roots of the conflict have been obliterated. While most historians do not attempt at all to bring order to the chaos of Negro history, those who have – the Marxists – find it convenient from a theoretical standpoint to see Negroes in history as black proletarian "prototypes" and forerunners of the "black workers" who will participate in the proletarian revolution. This Aptheker-Communist Party mythology, created around patronizing deification of Negro slave heroes (Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, etc.), results in abstracting them from their proper historical context and making it appear that they are relevant to modern reality. Of course, there will be those Marxists who will argue that their inability to come to terms in theory with Negro nationalism does not arise from an error in their interpretations of the role of the Negro bourgeoisie, of Washington, or Du Bois. They will defend all the historical romanticism and the sentimental slave hero worship of the Aptheker Cult. They will say that all this is past history and has no bearing on the "new situation." But if one takes this position, then of what value is the Marxist historical method? The flaws in the Marxist theoretical approach lead to the inability to cope with the implications of Negro Nationalism.

## **Negro Nationalism and the Left**

To the extent that the myth of a uniform "Negro People" has endured, a clear understanding of the causes of Negro nationalism has been prevented. In reality, no such uniformity exists. There are class divisions among Negroes, and it is misleading to maintain that the interests of the Negro working and middle class are identical. To be sure, a middle-class NAACP leader and an illiterate farmhand in Mississippi or a porter who lives in Harlem all want civil rights. However, it would be enlightening to examine why the NAACP is not composed of Negro porters and farmhands, but only of Negroes of a certain type.

What we must ask is why these classes are not all striving in the same directions and with the same degrees of intensity. Why are some lagging behind the integration movement, and still others in conflict with it? Where is the integration movement going? Into what is the integration movement integrating? Is the Negro middle class integrating into the white middle class? Are integrated lunch counters and waiting stations commensurate with integration into the "mainstream of American life" ? Will the Negro ten percent of the population get ten percent representation in the local, state and national legislatures? –or ten percent representation in the exclusive club of the "power elite" ? Why are some Negroes anti-integration, others pro-integration, and still others uncommitted? Why is there such a lack of real unity among different Negro classes toward one objective? Why are there only some 400,000 members in the NAACP out of a total Negro population of some 18 and 20 million? Why does this membership constantly fluctuate? Why is the NAACP called a Negro organization when it is an interracial organization? Why are the Negro nationalist organizations "all Negro" ? Why do nationalist organizations have a far greater proportion of working-class Negro membership than the NAACP? Finally, why is it that the Marxists, of all groups, are at this late date tail-ending organizations such as the NAACP (King, CORE, etc.), which do not have the broad support of Negro workers and farmers? To attempt to answer these questions we must consider why the interests of the Negro bourgeoisie have become separated from those of the Negro working classes.

Tracing the origins of the Negro bourgeoisie back to the Booker T. Washington period (circa 1900), E. Franklin Frazier, a Negro sociologist and non-Marxist scholar, came to the enlightening conclusion that "the black bourgeoisie lacks the economic basis that would give it roots in the world of reality." [\*Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1957)] Frazier shows that the failure of the Negro to establish an economic base in American society served to sever the Negro bourgeoisie, in its "slow and difficult occupational differentiation," from any economic, and therefore cultural and organizational ties with the Negro working class. Since the Negro bourgeoisie does not, in the main, control the Negro

“market” in the United States economy, and since it derives its income from whatever “integrated” occupational advantages it has achieved, it has neither developed a sense of association of its status with that of the Negro working class, nor a “community” of economic, political, or cultural interests conducive to cultivating “nationalistic sentiments.” Today, except for the issue of civil rights, no unity of interests exists between the Negro middle class and the Negro working class. Furthermore, large segments of the modern Negro bourgeoisie have played a continually regressive “non-national” role in Negro affairs. Thriving off the crumbs of integration, these bourgeois elements have become de-racialized and de-cultured, leaving the Negro working class without voice or leadership, while serving the negative role of class buffer between the deprived working class and the white ruling elites. In this respect, such groups have become a social millstone around the necks of the Negro working class – a point which none of the militant phrases that accompany the racial integration movement down the road to “racial attrition” should be allowed to obscure.

The dilemma of the Negro intellectual in the United States results from the duality of his position. Detached from the Negro working class, he tries to integrate and to gain full membership in a stagnating and declining Western society. At the same time, failing to gain entry to the status quo, he resorts to talking like a revolutionary, championing revolutionary nationalism and its social dynamism in the underdeveloped world. But this gesture of flirting with the revolutionary nationalism of the non-West does not mask the fact that the American Negro intellectual is floating in ideological space. He is caught up in the world contradiction. Forced to face up to the colonial revolution and to make shallow propaganda out of it for himself, the American Negro intellectual is unable to cement his ties with the more racial-minded segments of the Negro working class. For this would require him to take a nationalistic stand in American politics – which he is loath to do. Nevertheless, the impact of revolutionary nationalism in the non-Western world is forcing certain Negro intellectuals to take a nationalist position in regard to their American situation.

Although Frazier does not delve into the nature of nationalism or connect the rise of nationalism with the failure of the Negro bourgeoisie to establish the “economic basis” of which he writes, it can be seen that the sense of a need for economic self-sufficiency is one of the causes for the persistence of nationalist groupings in Negro life. The attempt to organize and agitate for Negro ascendancy in and control of the Negro market is expressed in such racial slogans as “Buy Black.” The Negro nationalist ideology regards all the social ills from which the Negroes suffer as being caused by the lack of economic control over the segregated Negro community. Since the nationalists do not envision a time when whites will voluntarily

end segregation, they feel that it is necessary to gain control of the economic welfare of the segregated community. Moreover, many Negro nationalists, such as the Black Muslims, actually believe that racial separation is in the best interests of both races. Other maintain this separatist position because of the fact of the persistence of segregation.

When Communists and other Marxists imply that racial integration represents an all-class movement for liberation, it indicates that they have lost touch with the realities of Negro life. They fail to concern themselves with the mind of the working-class Negro in the depths of the ghetto, or the nationalistic yearnings of those hundreds of thousands of ghetto Negroes whose every aspiration has been negated by white society. Instead Marxists gear their position to Negro middle-class aspirations and ideology. Such Marxists support the position of the Negro bourgeoisie in denying, condemning, or ignoring the existence of Negro nationalism in the United States – while regarding the reality of nationalism in the colonial world as something peculiar to “exotic” peoples. The measure of the lack of appeal to the working classes of the Marxist movement is indicated by the fact that Negro nationalist movements are basically working-class in character while the new Negroes attracted to the Marxist movement are of bourgeois outlook and sympathies.

Ironically, even within Marxist organizations Negroes have had to function as a numerical minority, and have been subordinated to the will of a white majority on all crucial matters of racial policy. What the Marxists called “Negro-white unity” within their organizations was, in reality, white domination. Thus the Marxist movement took a position of favoring a racial equality that did not even exist within the organization of the movement itself. Today, the Marxist organizations which advocate racial integration do not have a single objective for the Negro that is not advocated by the NAACP or some other reform organization. It is only by virtue of asserting the “necessity of socialism” that the Marxist movement is not altogether superfluous. It could not be otherwise. For Marxism has stripped the Negro question of every theoretical concern for the class, color, ethnic, economic, cultural, psychological, and “national” complexities. They have no program apart from uttering the visionary call for “integration plus socialism” or “socialism plus integration.”

When Marxists speak of socialism to the Negro, they leave many young Negro social rebels unimpressed. Many concrete questions remain unanswered. What guarantee do Negroes have that socialism means racial equality any more than does capitalist democracy? Would socialism mean the assimilation of the Negro into the dominant racial group? Although this would be “racial democracy” of a kind, the Negro would wield no political power as a

minority. If he desired to exert political power as a racial minority, he might, even under socialism, be accused of being "nationalistic." In other words, the failure of American capitalist abundance to help solve the crying problems of the Negro's existence, cannot be fobbed off on some future socialist heaven.

We have learned that the means to the end are just as important as the end itself. In this regard, Marxists have always been very naïve about the psychology of the Negro. It was always an easy matter for Marxists to find Negro careerists, social climbers, and parlor radicals to agree with the Marxist position on the Negro masses. However, it rarely occurred to Marxists that, to the average Negro, the means used by Marxists were as significant as the ends. Thus, except in times of national catastrophe (such as in the Depression of the 30's), Marxist means, suitable only for bourgeois reform, seldom approximated the aspirations of the majority of Negroes. Lacking a working-class character, Marxism in the United States cannot objectively analyze the role of the bourgeoisie or take a political position in Negro affairs that would be more in keeping with aspirations of the masses.

The failure to deal adequately with the Negro question is the chief cause of American Marxism's ultimate alienation from the vital stream of American life. This political and theoretical deficiency poses a serious and vexing problem for the younger generation who today have become involved in political activity centered around the defense of Cuba. Some accept Marxism; others voice criticisms of Marxist parties as being conservative or otherwise limited in their grasp of present realities. All of these young people are more or less part of what is loosely called the "New Left" (a trend not limited to the United States). It is now the responsibility of these new forces to find the new thinking and new approaches needed to cope with the old problems. Open-minded whites of the New Left must understand that Negro consciousness in the United States will be plagued with the conflict between the compulsions toward integration and the compulsions toward separation. It is the inescapable result of semi-dependence.

The Negro in the United States can no more look to American Marxist schema than the colonials and semi-dependents could conform to the Western Marxist timetable for revolutionary advances. Those on the American left who support revolutionary nationalism in Asia, Africa, and Latin America must also accept the validity of Negro nationalism in the United States. Is it not just as valid for Negro nationalists to want to separate from American whites as it is for Cuban nationalists to want to separate economically and politically from the United States? The answer cannot hinge merely on pragmatic practicalities. It is a political question

which involves the inherent right accruing to individuals, groups, nations and national minorities; i.e., the right of political separation from another political entity when joint existence is incompatible, coercive, unequal, or otherwise injurious to the rights of one or both. This is a principle that must be upheld, all expedient prejudices to the contrary.

It is up to the Negro to take the organizational, political, and economic steps necessary to raise and defend his status. The present situation in racial affairs will inevitably force nationalist movements to make demands which should be supported by people who are not Negro nationalists. The nationalists may be forced to demand the right of political separation. This too must be upheld because it is the surest means of achieving Federal action on all Negro demands of an economic or political nature. It will be the most direct means of publicizing the fact that the American government's policy on underdevelopment areas must be complemented by the same approach to Negro underdevelopment in the United States.

It is pointless to argue, as many do, that Negro nationalism is an invalid ideology for Negroes to have in American life, or that the nationalist ideas of economic self-sufficiency or the "separate Negro economy" are unrealistic or utopian. Perhaps they are, but it must be clearly understood that as long as racial integration remains a built-in characteristic of American society, nationalist ideology will continue to grow and spread. If allowed to spread unchecked and unameliorated, the end result can only be racial wars in the United States. This is no idle prophecy, for there are many convinced Negro nationalists who maintain the idea of the eventual acceptance of the Negro as a full-fledged American without regard to race, creed, or color, is also utopian and will never be realized. Can it be said, in all truth, that nationalist groups such as the Black Muslims are being unrealistic when they reject white society as a lost cause in terms of fulfilling any humanistic promises for the Negro? For whites to react subjectively to this attitude solves nothing. It must be understood. It must be seen that this rejection of white society has valid reasons. White society, the Muslims feel, is sick, immoral, dishonest, and filled with hate for non-whites. Their rejection of white society is analogous to the colonial peoples' rejection of imperialist rule. The difference is only that people in colonies can succeed and American Negro nationalists cannot. The peculiar position of Negro nationalists in the United States requires them to set themselves against the dominance of whites and still manage to live in the same country.

It has to be admitted that it is impossible for American society as it is now constituted to integrate or assimilate the Negro. Jimcrow is a built-in component of the American social structure. There is no getting around it. Moreover, there is no organized force in the United

States at present capable of altering the structural form of American society. Due to his semi-dependent status in society, the American Negro is the only potentially revolutionary force in the United States today. From the Negro himself must come the revolutionary social theories of an economic, cultural, and political nature that will be his guides for social action – the new philosophies of social change. If the white working class is ever to move in the direction of demanding structural changes in society, it will be the Negro who will furnish the initial force.

The more the system frustrates the integration efforts of the Negro, the more he will be forced to resolve in his own consciousness the contradiction and conflict inherent in the pro-and anti-integration trends in his racial and historical background. Out of this process, new organizational forms will emerge in Negro life to cope with new demands and new situations. To be sure, much of this necessity will be empirical, and no one can say how much time this process will take to work itself toward its own logical ends. But it will be revolutionary pioneering by that segment of our society most suitable to and most amenable to pioneering – the have-nots, the victims of the American brand of social underdevelopment.

The coming coalition of Negro organizations will contain nationalist elements in roles of conspicuous leadership. It cannot and will not be subordinate to any white groups with which it is allied. There is no longer room for the revolutionary paternalism that has been the hallmark of organizations such as the Communist Party. This is what the New Left must clearly understand in its future relations with Negro movements that are indigenous to the Negro community.

***“Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American” was originally published in Studies on the Left, Vol.2, No.3, 1962.***