An unmet challenge

Race and the Left in America

Ben Blumberg

IN HIS 1932 NOVEL BANJO, the radical black intellectual Claude McKay portrays the vibrancy of black cosmopolitanism in the French port city of Marseilles in the decade following the end of World War I. McKay's characters—boys of the docks, mendicants, and drifters—grapple with the racism of the wider society, while in their relations to one another live beyond race's narrowness. One in particular, the novel's protagonist, an itinerant intellectual named Ray, is driven by French police brutality to reflect on the reality of his race. In a powerful passage, McKay describes Ray as refusing "to accept the idea of the Negro simply, as a 'problem.' All of life was a problem....To Ray the Negro was one significant and challenging aspect of the human life of the world as a whole....If the Negro had to be defined, there was every reason to define him as a challenge rather than a 'problem' to Western civilization."[1] To this day, Ray's challenge remains unmet, not only in France, but in the United States and the rest of the world.

Following Ray, the term "challenge" is used here to signify a refusal of the traditional labeling of anti-black racism and racially justified segregation as a "problem." Naming racism and segregation as a problem merely acknowledges and passively describes a fact. However, the *challenge* is to elevate the problem's mere existence to the level of reality, to shape it through thought and action into a material that, because consciously formed, can be transformed and overcome.

For the American Left in the first half the 20th century—commonly referred to as the "Old Left"— the task of advancing freedom entailed a thoroughgoing critique of the racist institutions in American society, a socioeconomic and historical analysis of their origins and contemporary function, as well as practical efforts to eradicate these structures. In other words, racism was *the* challenge faced by the American Old Left. However, to a large extent it evaded the very challenge it set for itself by accepting the characterization of the black population's political situation as "the Negro problem." Only the best of the Old Left pushed against this characterization. The New Left, seeking to overcome the Old Left's shortcomings and receiving a great impulse from the demands of the Civil Rights movement to do so, would nevertheless come to reenact the previous generation's failings. This brings forth an uncomfortable question: if Marxists in the United States were unable to meet the challenge of raising racism to the level of a transformable reality, then to what extent can we speak of an American tradition of Marxism—a Marxism adequate to the situation of American capitalism—at all?

Marxism was at first a transplant to the United States, brought with the arrival of radicals who were compelled to leave Europe after the failed revolutions of 1848. However, as an organized political movement, it was forged with the great inspiration and impetus given by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917, and the subsequent revolutions that swept through Europe and the world. These profoundly radicalizing events led to the formation of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CP), first in 1919 as two separate and competing tendencies, and then as a unified Workers Party in 1921. According to James P. Cannon, one of the Communist Party's leaders in the 1920s, and one of the leaders of the Trotskyist fight against Stalinism from 1928 onward, the first years of the Communist Party were dominated by foreign émigrés with direct experience in Europe's mass Marxist parties. Their experience within Marxism led them to believe that it was their duty to preserve the integrity of Marxism against any misinterpretations by its new, less experienced American practitioners. However, this inadvertently led to a neglect of specific aspects of the historical development of the United States, most crucially the struggle against slavery, segregation, and racism. This theoretical deficiency remained even after the growth enjoyed by the CP in the 1920s and 1930s.

Thus limited by its theoretical outlook, the American Communist Party neglected the critical question: How should Marxists account for the specificity of national historical development, while, at the same time, attempting to overcome the nation-state as a political framework? In the case of anti-black racism and segregation, this requires us to critically reevaluate the dialectic of separatism and integration/assimilation in the race politics of the United States.

Claude McKay addressing the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in Moscow in 1922.

Concurrent with the formation of the Communist Party in the United States was a reactionary intensification of segregation, the roots of which extended back to the defeat of the period of Reconstruction following the Civil War. As a result of that defeat in the 1870s, many black ex-slaves fled the penury of the sharecropper system in the South to enter into northern industrial production. This process accelerated with the increased need for industrial labor generated by World War I. During this period the racist attitudes of the white working class were inextricably bound up with the assault on the liberties, freedoms, and personal safety of black Americans. So, while there were certainly many important examples of racial solidarity among members of the working class at the time—such as the black and white working class's defense of the black population during the Chicago race riots of 1919—still, in the eyes of many of its black counterparts and their leadership anti-black racism characterized America's white working class. The exclusionist practices of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) were a particularly egregious example of this in the labor movement itself. The AFL claimed at the time of its founding in 1886 to follow in the tradition of the Knights of Labor, and to practice the principle of labor solidarity without racial prejudice. However, this soon became a dead letter, as many of the affiliated craft unions refused to include black workers. Historian Theodore Draper has emphasized the equivocations made by the organization when confronted by this problem, describing how "[a]s early as 1900 the AFL's leaders resorted to the futile and tainted device of issuing its own charters to separate Negro locals. As a result, the AFL for half a century largely evaded the problem of, or blocked the way to, organizing Negroes."[2] The concessions made to Jim Crow in order to placate racist workers and advance labor's short-term goals combined with the paranoia of white workers who feared having their position undercut by cheap black labor to produce extremely difficult obstacles for the communist movement to overcome.

It was in this context of Reconstruction's failure and the racialized division of the working class that the Jamaican black separatist Marcus Garvey first gained for himself and for his United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) a mass following in the United States under the slogans "Africa for the Africans" and "Back to Africa." Garvey's movement was both courted and contested by the Communists in the immediate post-war years.[3] While the large following Garvey had garnered could not be ignored, the communists resisted interpreting it as an actual longing for African repatriation, viewing

"Challenge" continues on page 4

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19

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Statement of Purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The Platypus Review is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The Platypus Review hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–2,500 words, but longer pieces will also be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: *review_editorfdplatypus1917.org*. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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Against the status quo

An interview with Iranian trade unionist Homayoun Pourzad

Ian Morrison

Despite unrelenting state repression, there have been rumblings throughout the 2000s of renewed labor organizing inside the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). One result of this upsurge in labor organizing was the May 2005 re-founding of the Syndicate of Workers of the United Bus Company of Tehran and Suburbs, a union that has a long history, albeit one that was interrupted by the 1979 "Revolution," after which the union was repressed. The unions' leader, Mansour Osanloo, was severely beaten and thrown in the Rajaei prison where he remains in a state of deteriorating health. Osanloo is an Amnesty International "prisoner of conscience."

Another important result of the new labor organizing has been the emergence of the Independent Haft Tapeh Sugar Workers Union which launched an aggressive 42-day strike in June 2008 over wage-theft and deteriorating working conditions. In 2009, the regime imprisoned five union leaders in an attempt to smash the union for "acting against national security through the formation of a syndicate outside the law."

Since the dramatic street demonstrations that so captured the international media's attention beginning on June 12 of this year, the direction of events inside the IRI has sparked considerable debate as well as confusion. The continuing rivalry between various power factions within the government lends itself to no easy predictions, while little is known of the internal dynamics of the Green Movement responsible for the demonstrations. The fate of an already vulnerable organized labor movement in this volatile environment is likewise unclear. Whatever the outcome of the current power struggles, the future of Iranian organized labor is now an international issue. Its right to organize is in desperate need of support.

Following the U.S. Labor Against the War Conference, and in order to better grasp this situation, Platypus Review *Assistant Editor Ian Morrison sat down with Homayoun Pourzad, a representative from the Network of Iranian Labor Unions, to discuss the current crisis and the effects of "anti-imperial" ideologies on understanding the character of the IRI. Morrison conducted this interview, which has been edited for publication, on December 3, 2009.*

Ian Morrison: Before we get into the current situation, could you explain the organization of which you are a part, the Network of Iranian Labor Unions (NILU)?

Homayoun Pourzad: The idea for the NILU first arose about three years ago. Some of us already had union experience dating from before the 1979 Revolution. It upset us that, with millions of workers, there were no Iranian unions independent of the state, but only the semi-official Islamic Workers' Councils. What gave NILU its initial impetus was the Tehran bus drivers' actions led by Mansour Osanloo and his friends.

There was a nucleus of independent labor organizations in various trades, but the government always moved quickly to stifle that independence. Iran's Labor Ministry and the Ministry of Intelligence have standing directives to crush independent workers' activities, regardless of which faction is running the country. The government is very brutal in its attempts to destroy the nascent labor movement.

On the surface it looks like not much is happening with union labor activity in Iran, but even in the face of government oppression, many workers are secretly engaged in organizing underground unions. These efforts have not yet peaked. Also, organizers have to walk a fine line, since once you get too big you are more easily detected. So labor organizers have to be careful how they recruit, and how many workers meet together at once. But the nucleus of the movement is in place and once the situation allows for it there will be a huge mushrooming of independent labor unions. The NILU operates in two different trade associations. We are also doing our best to start publication of a national labor press. The task is to make labor news available and to begin to provide some political analysis.

IM: Could you explain the political crisis in Iran that has unfolded since the election and how it is affecting your efforts to organize labor?

HP: First of all, anybody who tells you that they have a full picture is lying, because the situation is very crazy.

There are at least five dozen, semi-autonomous power centers, factions, and groups vying for influence. Not even [Supreme Leader Ayatollah Sayyid Ali] Khamenei knows for certain what will happen tomorrow. But this does not mean there is complete anarchy. Speaking generally, there are at present four major centers of power, or rather, three plus one. The first three are Supreme Leader Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Revolutionary Guards, while the fourth, the nascent popular movement, is of an altogether different character though is still remains somewhat amorphous. It is still finding its own voice, needs, and strengths—but it continues to evolve. For the foreseeable future, the first three powers will more or less effectively determine how things will turn out. This said, Khamenei is already weakened. This is for two reasons: He apparently has health problems and, more importantly, he has had made huge political blunders. In another country, people would probably say, "He's only human." But, in Iran, he is not only human. He is somewhere between human and saint, at least for his supporters and propagandists. But saints are not supposed to make blunders, at least not so many in so short a time!

IM: What is the relationship between the NILU and the nascent popular movement?

HP: There is no organic relationship between them, just as there are no organic relationships to speak of between the different elements of this movement. Mousavi does not even have an organic relationship with his own followers because of the pervasive power of repression. So, the nascent labor movement's relationship with the popular movement is tenuous by both necessity and because of the way things have evolved. That said, we fully support their goals and will participate in all demonstrations. We even support Mousavi himself because he has remained steadfast at least up until now in defending the people. So long as he continues to do this, he deserves our support. Of course, if he changes tack, that is a different story. We think this is a truly democratic movement such as we have not seen in Iran before, including during the Revolution. Every group involved with the Iranian Revolution, without exception, believed only in monopolizing power; democracy was nobody's concern. But now there is a very mature movement in that sense, particularly among the young people, and the fact that it has withstood so much violence in the last few months shows that it is deeply rooted. Many people were worried at first that the protests would fizzle out, but the continuance of the actions up to this day vindicate our support. The Iranian government has really gone overboard with stopping the protestors—it has been very bloody and violent—and still they have been unable to squash the protests entirely.

IM: But do you think Mousavi stands for workers' rights at all? He seems to have a checkered political history.

HP: We do not know what his stance is. He seems generally favorable to workers' rights, but, at any rate, our platform is not identical to his. The movement supporting Mousavi is a broad national-democratic front; we are all working with a sort of minimum program. The movement has formulated no long-term plans, and it is now in danger of being decimated. We do not have any illusions that anyone in the leadership of the Green Movement is 100 percent on board with workers' rights, but this is not the time to discuss that. Right now, we are fighting a dangerously reactionary dictatorship. Things will become clearer as time goes on, but right now we do not seek to magnify the differences among those opposing the dictatorship.

IM: There are some who see Ahmadinejad, because he is so anti-American, as anti-imperialist, and thus as leftist. What is your response to such characterizations?

HP: Well, the problem with this argument is that it assumes everyone in the world who rants and raves against the U.S. or Israel is somehow progressive. Osama bin Laden, Mullah Omar, Sada'am Hussein, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—these men are all more truly anti-American than any leftist. But the rhetoric of Ahmadinejad and his ilk is all demagoguery, as far as we are concerned. Either it is in the service of power politics, or else it is just a fig leaf to hide the disgrace of their own politics, which in all these cases is profoundly anti-Left and anti-working class.

IM: Still, in the peace movement here some people are uncomfortable taking a stand against Ahmadinejad or policies in Iran because they think that this is tantamount to supporting American policy.

HP: Well, I can tell you how every democratically minded person in Iran would reply: Ahmadinejad is essentially creating the ideal situation for foreign intervention. He is deliberately provocative. For instance, there is no need to use the kind of language he uses against Israel; it is genuinely odious, his frequent comments about the Holocaust and the like. But he speaks like this for a reason: He is a right-wing extremist seeking to rally his people through fear and hatred. That is what he is doing. To us it is actually incomprehensible how anyone could support Ahmadinejad just because he rants and raves about America. It really makes no sense to us. When I tell people in Iran that there are some progressive groups in America that support Ahmadinejad, they think I am pulling their leg. It makes no sense to them. But I know that this goes on and, to the extent it does, it gives the Left a bad name.

IM: What is your take on Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who is very popular on the Left in America? He is interviewed in progressive organs such as *The Nation*, for instance. He appears on the mass media as leading a front against America together with Ahmadinejad.

HP: We really do not know. We are really confused as to why Chavez is Ahmadinejad's buddy. It makes no sense to us. It has made it almost impossible in Iran to defend his Bolívarian Revolution. When you have people being beaten or tortured, and so on, and then tell them, "Well, there is this government that supports your government, but these guys are good guys," it is difficult to fathom, really. We hope that Chavez changes his policy, because when there is a change of government in Iran it will be accompanied by a total rupture with everyone who supported Ahmadinejad.

IM: What in your view is fueling the current crisis?

HP: Well, let me go back to a point I was making earlier. Ayatollah Khamenei, because of his errors, has seen his status diminished. He no longer has about him the mystique that once so terrified and intimidated people. Then you have Ahmadinejad, who has turned out to be a rogue element for the regime, one that is perhaps doing more damage than good for them right now. Then there are the Revolutionary Guards, who have the bulk of the real power in Iran. They have made a power grab all over the country, so that now they control the economy, the political situation, and the Parliament. Still, Khamenei, Ahmedinejad, and the Revolutionary Guards are in an ongoing struggle for power. They unite only in the face of common enemies, whether internal or foreign, and not always then.

The current crisis in Iran is best understood as a set of concurrent crises: First, there is the legitimacy crisis, which I discussed just now with reference to Khamenei; second, is the political crisis where the various factions within Iranian "politics" cannot agree on anything; third, is the economic crisis which the ruling class is utterly incapable of addressing. The country was in recession even before the election. What will bring the economic crisis to a head is Ahmadinejad's plan to cut all the subsidies, which are quite big, between 15 to 20 percent of the GDP (though nobody really knows for sure the exact amount, due to the lack of transparency in the administration). The supposed populist Ahmadinejad intends to cut the subsidies for transportation, utilities, energy, and even for staples such as rice and wheat. After this happens, there will be spiraling inflation, of course. The cut in subsidies for energy and utilities will force factories currently operating at a loss and/or below capacity to engage in massive layoffs. That is when we will see a number of labor actions. There may also be short-lived and violent urban uprisings. But rather than these riot-like urban uprisings, we are focusing on organizing labor to bring the country to a halt if need be.

Iranian labor is in a really awful situation, arguably the worst since its inception a century or so ago. With millions of workers in the formal sector, we still lack official, legal independent unions. On the other hand, the situation is ideal for organizing. The labor force is ready for independent assertion, though they need the kind of support that only comes from dedicated organizers.

Iran's spiraling political and economic crisis coincides with another crisis that is only just beginning, the international crisis regarding the nuclear problem. Diplomatic talks are failing, as was inevitable. We feel that the regime is trying to build a bomb, but probably not testing it for a while. There is a clear danger that this might lead to an air attack or to some other form of major military intervention, which would divert attention from the internal situation. Indeed, as I said above, this is what this regime is hoping for. It would be a monumental mistake if there were to be an attack against Iran, since the nuclear program can only truly be stopped if the popular movement becomes more substantial and is able to change the government, or at least force changes in its policies.

IM: So your sense is that, with the nuclear program, Ahmadinejad is actually trying to provoke aggression?

HP: Indeed. We condemn any kind of foreign intervention, but we also condemn Ahmadinejad's provocative policies, in part because they are geared toward provoking just such an intervention. Anyway, we do not think the military route is the way to go with this, because it is not likely to succeed even in halting the nuclear program. We think the labor movement in Iran is poised to play a strategic role, even on the international stage, because once the working class organizes itself, it really can cripple the regime, especially given the current economic crisis. And, as I say, a major strike wave is looming in Iran.

The situation for Iranian workers right now is dismal. For the last 4 or 5 years the demand for labor has dropped. There is also the mania for imports that Ahmadinejad has encouraged for the last 5 years. The result is that across the country factories are facing shutdowns and bankruptcy. There is also an immigrant Afghan labor force of roughly seven hundred thousand, with whom we sympathize, and whose expulsion from the country we oppose just as we oppose the many forms of coercion and discrimination this government levels against them, but it is a fact that their acceptance of as little as 50 to 60 percent of normal salary exerts downward pressure on everyone's wages. So, if you look at all these factors, you see that things are really awful for Iranian workers; their bargaining position is weak. In the current environment, once you go on strike or you have some sort of shutdown, they can easily fire you and find someone else.

The labor status quo has also changed. Few people are aware of this, but Iran once had very progressive labor laws. In the aftermath of the Revolution, it was very hard to legally fire workers. But now, 65 or 70 percent of the labor force consists in temporary contract workers who lack most basic rights. They can now get fired and be deprived of their benefits quite easily. This is what makes the situation so very ripe for organizing, and makes organization necessary, despite the regime's brutal repression. They do not allow for any labor organizations independent of the state, and they are ruthless. The *least* that could happen to an exposed labor organizer is that he gets fired and thrown in solitary confinement for several months.

This year is critical for the Iranian labor movement in many ways, and we need support of all kinds. Iran is in great danger. The government acts like an occupying army. It treats the country's ethnic minorities—Kurds, Baluchis, and Arabs—as though they were foreign nationals. The resulting national disintegration grows worse day by day. At the same time, extremist groups are finding it increasingly easy to operate. Among the Sunni minority, fundamentalism is growing.

There is nothing to be said in favor of this regime, after the election. Before the election, there were perhaps some disparate elements within the government working toward reform, but this has ceased to be the case. All that remains is extremely retrograde: the government is ruining the country's culture and economy, while sowing discord among the people. They are turning minorities against each other and against the rest of the country—Shia against Sunni, not to mention men against women—all because the Islamic Republic state wants to retain and expand power. When these methods fail, they turn to brutal and undisguised repression.

IM: I am wondering about the comparison of what is happening today to the 1979 Revolution. There were mass mobilizations then, with various leftist groups and parties involved, but when the Shah fell, it left a power vacuum that was filled by reactionaries. First, is the comparison salient? Second, is there the possibility of there emerging a power vacuum, and what can the labor organizers do in this situation?

HP: You are wondering if, because there is not a clearly formulated platform for the movement, that it may go awry, and extremist groups come to power? Of course, this is a possibility. But I think there are reasons to be optimistic. Thirty years of this sort of psychotic, pseudo-radical extremism has really taught everybody a lesson. You have to be either extremely naive, or a direct beneficiary of the system not to see that the country has been harmed. In general, the young people are more mature than their parents' generation. The youth do not have the same romanticization of revolutionary violence, which was one of the reasons things got out of hand in 1979. It was not only the clerics that were extremists, practically every group endorsed revolutionary violence of one kind or another; it is just that in their mind their violence was justified, whereas everyone else's violence was "reactionary." The new generation does not hold those beliefs. Iranian society has a strong extremist strand, but I believe that is changing now. There is a belief in tolerance, in wanting to avoid force, and in trying to understand one's political opponents rather than just crushing them. This is something extremely important and not altogether common in much of today's Middle East.

Let me also say, along these lines, that Islam has never really undergone a Reformation. But we are seeing signs of this happening in the IRI today. It is happening very quietly in the seminaries. It could only happen where Islamists have actually come to power and shown beyond all doubt the inadequacy or even the bankruptcy of their ideas and their ideologies. This forces healthy elements within the clergy—not those who are out there to enrich themselves, but those who are religious because they are utopian-minded—to go back to their books, to the Koran, to revise the old ideas. Such clerics are not in the majority yet they are sizable and they are spread throughout the clerical hierarchy from grand Ayatollahs to the lowest clergy. Earlier, the idea of reforming the medieval interpretations of the Koran and Islam came mainly from Muslim intellectuals, but now a considerable part of the religious hierarchy is coming to the same conclusion. Some are operating in very dangerous circumstances. There is a special court of clergy, similar to the Inquisition courts, that want to silence them. But such ideas cannot be silenced so easily.

If there is a military attack on Iran, it will set back the progress of many years. This is exactly what the regime wants, at this point, which is why Ahmadinejad is so provocative. He wants the Israelis to launch an air strike. The West cannot simply bomb a few installations and think that it will all be done. The current regime would strive to escalate that fight. Even if Obama verbally condemns an intervention in Iran by another nation, Iran will use it as a pretext to expand the fight and things will rapidly get out of hand. It would provide him with a new recruitment pool, which is drying up, because right now the best and the brightest of Iran do not go into the Revolutionary Guards. Their recruits today are opportunists or those who simply need the money. The people are turning against the regime. What could change all this is if we came under attack, if, as they would claim, "Islam is threatened." The regime might then successfully stir up nationalistic sentiments, perhaps not so much in Tehran, but that is only 14 million or so. Most of the country lives in smaller towns, and the only news they get comes from state broadcasts. These people could become recruits, leading to all sorts of awful things. In the meantime, at the very least we will continue to see street fighting, riots, and so on. The youth will only endure torture and being kicked out of schools up to a point. As it is, the regime opens fire on peaceful street demonstrations—I have seen it myself. The government's hope is that some of the young people will arm themselves and fight back. That is one of the dangers here.

IM: You are here for the U.S. Labor Against the War Conference. What sort of relationships do you hope to build with other labor unions in America and around the world?

HP: First, I want to communicate to them what is happening in my country, that there is a labor movement and that it needs support. More specifically, even though there is no guarantee that this will change what this government is doing, we hope with the help of our American friends to put together an international committee of labor unions in defense of Iranian labor rights. The Iranian state does not even pretend to care what the international community or the general public thinks of them. Still, they are weaker now than ever before, and the regime is concerned about what might come after a military action or major sanctions. So, for the first time it looks like they are going to be sensitive to what trade unions, especially those against intervention, have to say, or what they will do. In fact, Ahmadinejad's government has been sending envoys to the International Labor Organization (ILO) and courting it assiduously. They go out of their way to placate them, whereas ten years ago they did not give a damn what the ILO thought. So there may now be some scope to pressure the regime to release imprisoned labor organizers. In addition to that, we would like to inform the American labor movement and the public at large of the dangers of any kind of military intervention.

IM: Do you think there are any possibilities for a party of labor in Iran? That is a problem all over the world. Different labor organizations meet up, and there are groups that believe in various trade union rights, and they release statements to that effect. But there is no political body that consistently stands up for working people.

HP: I may have sounded too much of an alarmist, for I emphasized the dangers. But the opportunities are also great. Like I said, you have almost eight million workers in need of organizing. They will even be able to organize themselves, if the situation changes. The Green movement holds promise, I think. It came totally out of the blue; no one expected it, from the Ministry of Intelligence to the opposition and the foreign governments. This means there are elements that could coalesce into a progressive and democratic labor party. It should not be forgotten that Iran not only has a huge working class, but also a tradition of left-wing activity going back some 100 years. The working class in Iran, moreover, is not semi-proletarian as it was during the Iranian Revolution. This generation of workers has advanced political skills and a mature political worldview. You are no longer dealing with peasants just come to the city. Iran is fairly industrialized in many ways and these workers have their own subcultures. We have a good situation in that sense. So yes, there is a good possibility that we will have a strong labor party. The conditions are there, but none of this will materialize without a strong, deeply rooted labor movement.

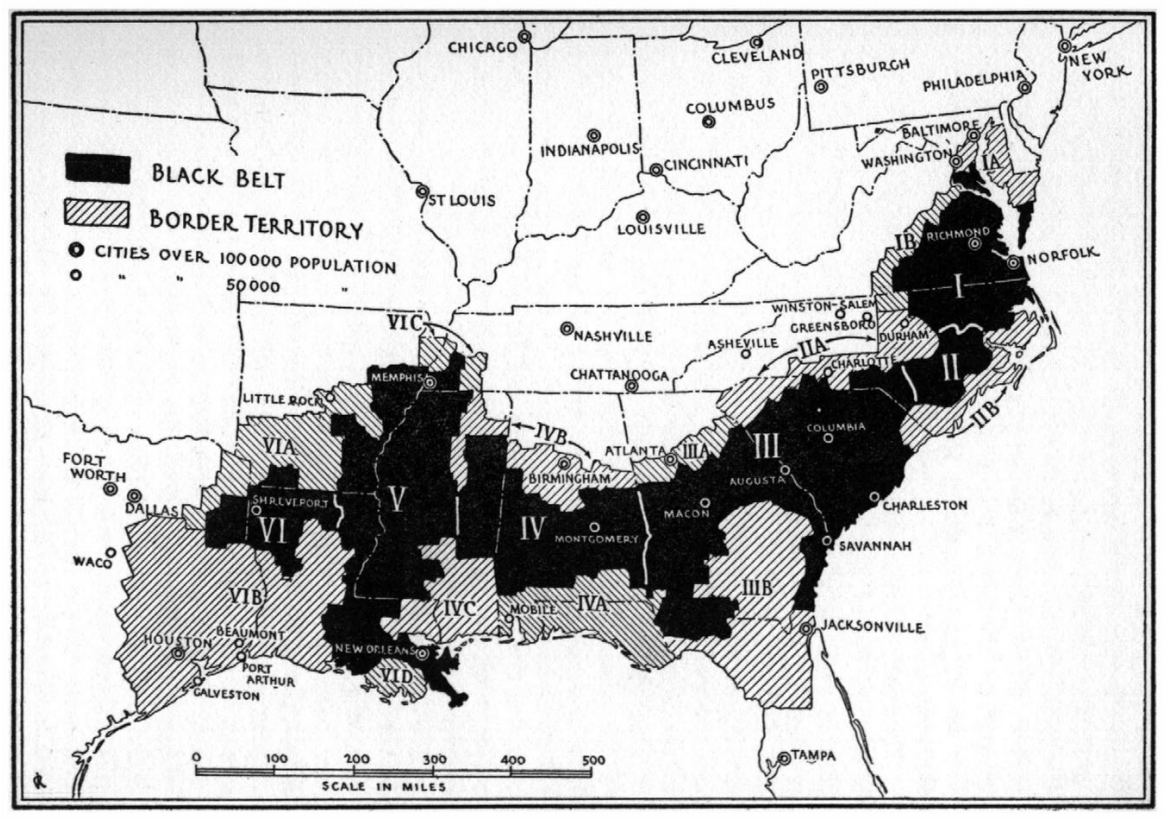
So what needs to be done? We must put across to other sectors of society what the working class stands for. The protest movement is now primarily middle class. That is its primary weakness. But once labor strikes get un-

"Interview" continues on page 4

Challenge, continued from page 1

Garvey's slogans as quixotic and unlikely to garner appeal among black Americans.[4] Communists in the early 1920s concluded that the militant stance that Garvey took toward white domination expressed black Americans' frustration with the slow pace of social integration and their anger at the betrayal of the democratic ideals for which many black soldiers thought they had fought in World War I. Garvey's black nationalism had little theoretical impact on the communists until later in the decade, when Stalin tightened his grip over the Third International. Indeed, it is ironic that the Communist Party only truly began to absorb Garvey's influence in 1928, after the collapse of the UNIA due to Garvey's personal failings and outright fraudulence. Yet, the Stalinist ideal of "socialism in one country" retrospectively justified Garveyist ideas, and so the Back to Africa movement enjoyed posthumous influence in the form of the Communist Party's "Black Belt thesis."

The Black Belt formula, first developed in 1928 and instated as official policy in 1930, held that the black population in a portion of the United States constituted a nation within a nation. James S. Allen, who by the early thirties had become one of the Party's authorities on this matter, defined the "Black Belt" as a territory stretching from east of Dallas, Texas to just south of Washington D.C., encompassing portions of twelve southern states. According to Allen, this crescent contained a string of contiguous counties inhabited predominately by segregated black sharecroppers working on cotton plantations under conditions not dissimilar from the chattel slavery that had defined the region prior to the Civil War. Shaped by the history of slavery, and hardened by decades of segregation, this "black nation" represented to the Communist Party the North American equivalent of an oppressed colony.[5] Construing the problem in this way, Communists were compelled to advocate for the Black Belt's "national self-determination." For black Americans living outside of the south the Party retained the slogan, "full social, political and economic equality." Thus, the Black Belt thesis was elaborated within the Party during the same years that Stalin's theory of "socialism in one country" naturalized the nation-state as the "organic" boundary for revolutionary politics.[6] In sundering the part (the south) from the whole (the United States and global capitalism), the American Communist Party's call for black self-determination contributed to the global defeat of Marxist internationalism and, with it, the dissolution of the spirit of radical cosmopolitanism articulated by intellectuals like McKay. The national frame ceased to be the immediate context of American politics and became its absolute horizon and insurmountable limit.



Black Belt and Border Territory

Map included in James S. Allen's 1936 *The Negro Question in the United States*.

The American Communist Party's theoretical failings regarding race and racism were extreme and had profoundly destructive effects not only on the struggle against anti-black racism and segregation but also on the entire international struggle for human emancipation through the revolutionary overcoming of capitalism. But, to speak only of the immediate consequences, there were two: First, the Communist Party smuggled into Marxism a disguised apology for the existence of racial segregation by misunderstanding the separation of the races as being derived from and expressive of national difference. The overcoming of racism had been a matter of revolution *per se*. Now, it was reformulated as a national question distinct from and thus free of considerations of international proletarian revolution. Second, the Communist Party neglected to recognize that Garvey's separatism saw the oppression of black people worldwide as part of a unified reality, and thus contained within itself at least a germ of internationalism, however distorted by the ideology of racial separatism. This potential internationalism within black separatism was precisely what was at stake for McKay in his portrayal of the black cosmopolitanism burgeoning in the Marseilles of the 1920s, a result of the black participation in the World War I and the increased incorporation of black workers into world industry.

It would be easy, given the now commonplace critique of Stalinism, to simply attribute the theoretical problems of the Communist Party in the United States to the political direction determined for it by the Stalinist Comintern. However, when we look to the history of the opposition to Stalinism—the Left Opposition, and, later, the Fourth International—we find no tradition worthy of unqualified endorsement. Instead, there is the history of a more adequate perspective being eschewed in favor of rearticulations, in various forms, of the Communist Party's basic misconceptions. Not until 1933 did there emerge a potentially more adequate perspective with the composition of a pamphlet by Max Shachtman entitled *Communism and the Negro* and the discussions in Turkey between Arne Swabeck and Trotsky.[7] Unfortunately, the insights of these perspectives were neglected, as well.

Shachtman's pamphlet was never published by the Communist League of America (CLA), and although it was clearly intended as a contribution to the thoroughgoing study called for by the CLA's 1931 National Conference, it is unclear how widely it was circulated.[8] From Shachtman's letters it is certain that the pamphlet's immediate purpose was to persuade Trotsky to his point of view. However, it appears Trotsky never gave it due attention. This was unfortunate, since Shachtman's argument represented a major theoretical advance in the Marxist understanding of the challenges of race and racism. It emphasized that black ex-slaves played a crucial role in restructuring southern society after what Shachtman called "the Second American Revolution," i.e. the destruction of slavery that accompanied the Union's victory in the Civil War. Shachtman further pointed out that their defeat by the counterrevolutionary, racist denouement of Reconstruction established the fundamental challenge faced by the Marxists of his day: a conservative, chauvinistic, and racist working class. Shachtman argued that the possibility of integrating the United States required an awakening of the revolutionary class consciousness of the American proletariat and that this in turn required the proletariat to realize that, in order to liberate itself, it must, as Marx and Engels said in *The Holy Family*, destroy the conditions for its own existence. In the specific context of the United States this meant, *inter alia,* destroying the working class's racial segregation and the racist consciousness that accompanied it.

A large section of Shachtman's pamphlet was devoted to exposing the fallacies of James S. Allen's conclusions about the nature of the South and its agrarian black population. Allen's work attempted to justify on sociological grounds the national self-determination slogan. Through the interpretation of census data, Allen claimed that the southern black population, which comprised the majority of the American black population at the time, would permanently adhere to the region.[10] Implicit in this analysis was a conservative reading of the historical conditions faced by the American black population, one that assumed the experience of slavery and segregation was so indelible as to permanently entrench the separation of the races. Thus, to Allen, southern blacks were not only likely to remain an unintegrated part of American economic and social life, but their exclusion had produced a nascent national identity separate from that of the "white" American nation. Today's world has clearly demonstrated the incorrectness of these views. Even by the 1960s Draper could write,

> If the Communists made any progress among Negroes in the 1930, it was due to their militant championing of "equal rights," not "self-determination." One reason for the failure of self-determination was that it went against the tide of history....In effect, the Black Belt has been getting smaller and less black for half a century, gradually cutting the ground from under the thesis of its "self-determination."[11]

Decades before the "tide of history" was readily apparent, Shachtman was able to expose just how dubious was Allen's reasoning. Although Shachtman painstakingly mobilized sociological data to undermine Allen's argument, the strength of his analysis lay in his recognition of the force inherent in the unfulfilled possibilities of the Civil War and Reconstruction, on the one hand, and industrial integration, on the other. Allen's myopia, by contrast, resulted from his one-sided emphasis on the brutality of slavery and segregation. Even if Shachtman's pamphlet had no other merit than this, it would represent an important contribution to the Left's capacity to meet the challenge of race and racism.

Shachtman's pamphlet unfortunately had much less effect on the trajectory of the CLA, the American section of the Left Opposition, than did the results of the 1933 discussions in Turkey between Trotsky and Arne Swabeck. In these talks, Swabeck emphasized the same revolutionary potential of the demand for integration that Shachtman emphasized in his pamphlet, but Trotsky remained unconvinced. It is important to note, however,

"Challenge" continues below

Interview, continued from page 3

derway in the next few months, we hope they will change how the Green movement sees the workers, themselves, and their moment. It is our job as labor activists to put across a genuine working class platform and to familiarize the country with working class demands.

We cannot, as some Left groups do, start condemning the Green Movement just because it lacks a strong Left component. It is the Left's job to influence the movement and to see that its demands and wishes are incorporated –not just with respect to Mousavi, but to the movement as a whole.

We cannot start condemning the movement even if and when it starts lurching to the right, because, again, it is the Left's job to be there side by side with it. By being there, I mean, for example, our press must also reflect their concerns and their needs. We should not be supercilious, but rather have a healthy dialogue with all the different contingents within it. Above all, we should not speak from above in a condescending manner. Only when we are side by side with the people who are fighting on the streets will they listen to us. In the last six or seven months, there has been an incredible growth of interest in the Left. This has been very spontaneous, among young people. If anything, the old generation mishandled their political situation and turned young people off by looking down on them.

If the labor movement gets its act together, it could really help the present popular movement, which, on its own, lacks the muscle to stand up to the regime. With the workers on board there can be economic strikes. In 1979, for months there were people yelling and clamoring in the streets, but it was only when the oil workers entered the picture that the Western governments told the Shah to leave.

Because of all this and because of the fact that the labor movement, by its nature, tries to avoid extremism or revolutionary romanticism, there is reason to hope. The labor movement's pragmatism allows it to stave off the dangers of extremism from both Left and right. The two main labor unions, the sugar cane workers and bus drivers, are resolute in protesting against the status quo and advancing their political and social agenda. They are supported by over 90 percent of the work force. If you talk to bus drivers in Tehran they are all upset about what has happened recently, but you never hear anything disparaging about the union leadership and what they have done. This shows the kind of work organizers have done. This was not a spur-of-the-moment thing. They organized over several years and held many sessions with intellectuals who taught them constitutional rights, economics, and so on. But, of course, there have been mistakes, as is to be expected. But those mistakes were necessary in some ways, so that the rest of the labor unions will not repeat them. **IP**

Challenge, continued from above

the *lack* of conviction that characterized Trotsky's perspective, as he himself admitted to being unfamiliar with the circumstances. Still, Trotsky considered the demand for equality as essentially liberal, whereas, extrapolating from his experiences in the Russian Revolution, he thought the demand for self-determination and, by extension, the politics of black separatism might have considerable revolutionary potential. From 1933 onward, then, the CLA's perspective was muddled. The stagnation and then regression of a Leftist theory of race is made painfully clear by the 1939 conversation in Mexico between Trotsky and West Indian Marxist C. L. R. James. The product of this conversation was a resolution on the "Negro Question" which mirrored the very shortcomings in the Communist Party's program that the CLA (now renamed The Socialist Workers Party (SWP)) had previously criticized.

Taking Trotsky's tentative conclusions in his conversation with Swabeck and his later dialog with James as a dictum, the Fourth International, in a 1939–1940 resolution, came out in favor of black national self determination, "should they want it." But this missed Trotsky's most important point: the correct perspective towards the struggles against racism and segregation could only be developed in the course of attempting to practically intervene in the reality of the problem. This would have meant an attempt to build a black Trotskyist leadership and to wage war against the chauvinistic racist attitudes of the American proletariat both white and black, but especially white. But instead of this, the Trotskyists left the issue still unresolved, adopting the view that "we must wait and see." In a politically impoverished situation, the Trotskyists, like the Communist Party, left black workers to fend for themselves. The black proletariat was expected to raise itself to the task of "determining themselves," to pull their politics up by their bootstraps. During this time, the black recruits to the Trotskyist SWP almost entirely abandoned it.

The next phase of the attempt to recognize the challenge posed to Marxism by racism and segregation began in the context of the full-scale liquidation of the revolutionary content of Marxism by the SWP, characterized by a continued acceptance of the notion of Black Nationalism. By the 1950s Trotskyism was wrecked by the loss of an internationalist perspective—a loss represented by "Pabloism" and an anti-theoretical mentality that maintained that revolutionary theory had only to be completed by practical implementation. Opposition to this development began to form within the SWP, led in part by Richard Fraser. Fraser argued against the party's line on black nationalism, returning to the arguments of Shachtman and Swabeck. Advancing a theory of revolutionary integrationism, he argued that black workers were destined to take up a vanguard role in the revolutionary struggle.

Writing in the 1950s, Fraser stressed the importance of consciousness and theory as necessary elements of the struggle to overcome capitalism and, more particularly, the racist form it had taken in the United States.[12] However, Fraser's perspective was limited by two factors. First, in his understanding of revolution and integration he tacitly accepted the national frame. Second, despite his emphasis on the critical role of consciousness in the fight against racism and segregation, he nevertheless argued that, simply because blacks faced extraordinary repression from the racist U.S. state, the black worker could be expected, by virtue of this super-exploitation, to develop a consciousness of their situation. By this retreat into a liberal conception of interest-driven politics, Fraser repeated the anti-theoretical attitude of his opponents within the SWP and thus missed the opportunity to critically grasp race dynamics in American capitalism.

Reducing in theory the dialectic of separatism and integration to a national question, the Communist Party's positions on race, and in particular its support of black nationalism, had ramifications beyond its immediate moment. Indeed, it was just this Stalinist legacy that resulted in the revolutionary posturing of the New Left as it came up against the limits of the Civil Rights movement. But the challenge of adequately understanding race and racism did not disappear simply because a politics adequate to it was given up. Instead, as Draper puts it, the ideological issues posed by black nationalism were "rediscovered" by the New Left in the 1960s. Because this younger generation of social thinkers failed to address the theoretical failures of the Old Left, they ultimately ended up reproducing the same ideological shortcomings. What the New Left found was an attenuated form of ideology relevant—albeit in problematic ways—to historical, sociopolitical, economic, and cultural conditions that had since undergone significant change. This was recognized at the onset of the "Black Power turn" in the late 1960s by Harold Cruse, whose *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* represents perhaps the most profound reflection on the intergenerational connections between the Old and New Left's understanding of the challenge of race and racism. In the chapter entitled "Postscript on Black Power," Cruse wrote, "When the direct-action methods [of the Civil Rights movement] failed against hardening barriers, they had to fall back on...the slogan of Black Power, as if to convince themselves that they were taking a revolutionary step forward....Whatever it is, it is essentially another variation of the Old Communist leftwing doctrine of 'self-determination in the black belt areas of Negro majority.'"[13]

If we take Cruse's insight seriously then we cannot escape the fact that the history of the challenge posed by anti-black racism and the errors of Marxists in attempting to overcome it have left a bitter legacy for the Left. If today's Left hopes to digest this history then it is incumbent upon us to consider how and why the communist Left did not raise an adequate opposition to race and racism. Such historical analysis could help illuminate why, despite the important progress made in the struggle against the racial structuring of American society, an adequate theory of the correlation between poverty and race and racism in advanced capitalist societies is still lacking. While the solution is unlikely to be identical to what was proposed 80 years ago, we must nevertheless reflect on how the political mistakes of the Stalinist Communist Party, and the Left Opposition's abandonment of its critique, has left the class-consciousness of the American working class, situated at the heart of global capitalism in the postwar period, deformed by racism. We live with the consequences today. **IP**

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1 Claude McKay, *Banjo* (Orlando: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 273.

2 Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia: The Formative Period* (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), 316.

3 See Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-36* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 22–29.

4 For example, see John Reed's argument in his speech at the Second Congress of the Communist International: "The Negros do not pose the demand of national independence.... They hold themselves above all to be Americans, they feel at home in the United States." John Reed, "America and the Negro Question," *The Minutes of Second Congress of the Communist international, Fourth Session*, *25 July 1920*, <www.marxists.org/archive/reed/index.htm>.

5 James S. Allen, *The Negro Question in the United States* (New York: International Publishers, 1936), 13–24.

6 Stalin himself may have overtly intervened in the matter, personally seeing to it that black national self-determination became the orthodox communist position regarding race in America. According to Theodore Draper, a delegation of black American communists visiting the Comintern in 1925 were told by Stalin that black Americans were a "national minority with some of the characteristics of a nation." The delegation's reaction, that this sounded like "Jim Crow in a revolutionary guise," was ignored. See Draper, *American Communism*, 334.

7 Max Shachtman, *Race and Revolution* (New York: Verso Press, 2003).

8 Writing from Büyükada, Turkey, Shachtman complained to Martin Abern that he had been unable to discuss the CLA's program for black Americans with Trotsky. He then indicated that he felt his pamphlet was being ignored, writing, "By the way, has my pamphlet completely disappeared? Is it never to see light?" [Max Shachtman to Martin Abern, 22 June 1933, Box 2, Folder 48B, Max Shachtman Papers (TAM 103), The Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University].

9 Allen, *Negro Question*, 24–31.

10 Theodore Draper, *The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism* (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), 65.

11 See Richard Fraser, "The Negro Struggle and the Proletarian Revolution," <www.bolshevik.org/history/Fraser/Fraser01.html>.

12 Harold Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2005), 547.

Book review: Jeffrey B. Perry, *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1882–1918.*

New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

Tim Barker

ONCE ACCLAIMED BY FIGURES as diverse as Eugene O'Neill, Henry Miller, and A. Philip Randolph, but later forgotten, the West Indian radical Hubert Henry Harrison is enjoying renewed prominence as a result of Jeffrey B. Perry's recent biography, Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883–1918, the first of two projected volumes. Perry's achievement in resuscitating his long-forgotten subject should not be understated, for Harrison's significance has been largely overlooked. For example, Harold Cruse's The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual deals extensively with the radical West Indian Harlem milieu but mentions Harrison only briefly. Perry's research, using many untapped primary sources including Harrison's private diary, will likely remain definitive for a long time to come, at least as regards the man himself, from his reading habits and sexual conquests to his uncompromising radicalism.

Harrison's life story is compelling. He immigrated to New York City as a teenager in 1900, and quickly became engaged with American intellectual life. Working at the post office and reading voraciously, he used his knowledge of Huxley and Darwin to reprove the racism of The New York Times in several precocious letters to the editor. Later, his criticism of Booker T. Washington led to his dismissal from the post office. Perry ably evokes the fecund intellectual milieu of lay historians and church lyceums through which Harrison moved, finding his way from freethought to Single-Taxism to socialism.

Harrison was present and engaged at key moments of the American Left in this era. The Socialist Party, which he joined during its brief period of growing electoral strength, already faced portentous dissension. Harrison, impressed by interracial unions in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), sympathized with the party's left-wing. He was briefly an editor at The Masses and a featured speaker during the 1913 Paterson strike. Alienated by the IWW's expulsion from the Socialist Party, Harrison's distance from the party only increased after its 1912 convention endorsed the racist policies of the socialist right wing, including inaction against segregated unions and anti-Chinese immigrant resolutions. After leaving the Socialist Party, he continued to criticize pro-war black leaders like W. E. B. DuBois, positioning himself as the spokesman of a new race radicalism, which was influenced by socialist critiques of imperialism and capitalism but aloof from existing parties.

Perry's main purpose in the book is to record and celebrate the life of this neglected figure. He succeeds in this narrow task, but neglects extensive critical or theoretical engagement, except for frequent, somewhat awkward refeferences to Perry's mentor Theodore W. Allen. Allen, an independent Marxist scholar, wrote about the interrelation of racism and capitalist rule in the United States, but from the quotations in Perry's text it is not clear what his unique contributions were or how his thinking illuminates Harrison's experience. In places, especially his introduction, Perry's enthusiasm for catholicity leads to obfuscatory categories like the "Black Liberation Movement." He sees Harrison as evidence of an underlying "ideological unity" binding together two very different movements. Perry traces both the conservative black nationalism of Malcolm X and the integrationist social democracy of Martin Luther King, Jr., back to Marcus Garvey and A. Philip Randolph, respectively. Both of these antecedent figures were themselves influenced by Harrison. Perry criticizes Garvey and Randolph, but mostly as a reflection of his personal investment in his biographical subject. Perry's attempts at analysis consist of little more than reports and ratifications of Harrison's views. Perry's compulsive, unexamined use of categories like "race-conscious" and "class-conscious" reduces them to mere talismans. For Perry, the two act as binaries: one is either conscious of one's racial or class position or one is not. This destroys nuance, and makes for repetitive prose: in one ten-page stretch, Harrison's project is labeled "militant, race-conscious" four times (322–332).

Perry ends his introduction by endorsing a quote from one of Harrison's contemporaries: "His biography… [cannot be written] unless it be culled from the influence his teachings had upon the lives of others" (18). This is one kind of history, which might make for interesting reading and warm feelings, but what is missing is a sense of tragedy. Another kind of history, less suited perhaps to the ideology of "hope," would focus on the influence Harrison did not have, or would acknowledge that the divisions that followed his death cannot be yoked together as expressions of the same laudable impulse simply because they share a common influence.

The comparison should not be overstated, but like Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin, Harrison was a radical who chafed at the constrictions of a Second International socialist party with deeply conservative instincts. Opposing the quietist determinism of socialists who saw their victory as ordained by inexorable historical laws, Harrison held views that Perry describes as "neither blindly dogmatic nor rigidly mechanical" (197). In his writings against such limiting applications of Marxist doxa, Harrison showed a deep belief in the importance of human agency. Likewise, against cautious leaders like Victor Berger and Morris Hillquit, Harrison described socialism as "not a matter of reform but a matter of revolution."

Unlike his European counterparts, though, Harrison was finally alienated from Second International socialism by the American issue of racism. Paid less than white organizers and limited in his public advocacy, Harrison ascribed his treatment to racism within the party and broke with it. The organized Left had conspicuously put class before race equality, so Harrison organized a countervailing "Race First" movement. This meant, first of all, building autonomous black institutions; Harrison would not accept any white funding for his newspaper The Voice. Without accommodating himself to capitalism or imperialism, he espoused independence from all existing political parties, so that blacks could use their votes in blocs for whichever party would give them the most. To his old comrades, this would have sounded like opportunistic nationalism, but in the absence of viable white efforts to stop such flagrant atrocities as lynching, Harrison was ready to set such concerns aside. Polemicizing against black socialists, Harrison wrote that "the roots of Class-consciousness inhere in a temporary economic order; whereas the roots of Race-consciousness must of necessity survive any and all changes in the economic order."[1] Though it is easy to understand Harrison's impulses in their context, today anti-black racism is a fading force in American society, while capitalism seems invulnerable.

This retreat was a tragedy. Harrison would never lend his talents to an organized left-wing party during the seminal years after 1917. Sadly telling is his modest response to the Russian Revolution: lauding the revolution's emancipation of the Jews and demanding similar treatment for blacks. Harrison was nuanced in his politics, rejecting Garveyite notions of a return to Africa while continuing to seek temporary alliances with socialists; however, his "Race First" organizing foreshadowed the demagogues of the coming decades. The political fruits of Harrison's organizing were eventually appropriated not by the Left, but by Marcus Garvey. A contemporary wrote, "It may be truly said that he was the forerunner of Garvey and contributed largely to the success of the latter by preparing the minds of Negroes through his lectures, thereby molding and developing a new temper among Negroes which undoubtedly made the task of the Jamaican much easier than it otherwise would have been" (338).

By refusing to struggle for equal rights for American blacks, the Socialist Party left black radicals like Hubert Harrison to a lonely fight. Rather than confront the reality of racism in and through a struggle for freedom, they opposed class to race. This abdication not only alienated blacks, it crippled the struggle to extend democracy into the economic sphere. Without a revolutionary consciousness on the part of blacks, whom Harrison called "the most thoroughly exploited of the American proletariat" (181), none of the myriad visions of socialism could have come into being. Harrison's experience with the Socialist Party is one example of the political defeats that led to a fatal separation of the racial and class questions on the American Left. The nationalist sentiment these events provoked was transmitted and debased from Garvey to Malcolm X to Black Power, and ensured that decades of radical energy and consciousness would be allocated to racialist struggles instead of the radical anti-capitalist internationalism that Harrison hoped the Socialist Party might represent. Works like Perry's, which celebrate notable figures for their achievements, are valuable but incomplete. No matter how impressive figures like Hubert Harrison seem, given the inefficacy of movements against capitalism following his death, his story ultimately becomes discouraging. **IP**

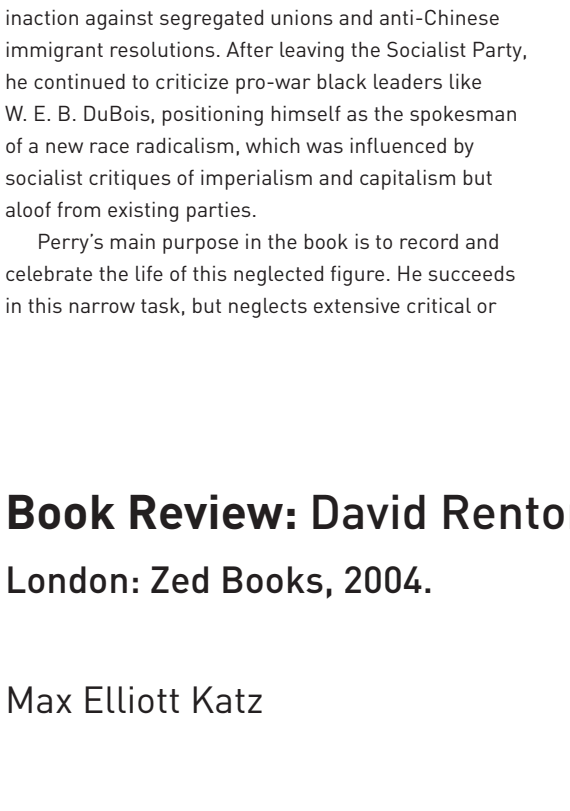
Hubert Henry Harrison, 1883–1927.

1 Hubert Harrison, *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, ed. Jeffrey B. Perry (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 105.

Book Review: David Renton, *Dissident Marxism: Past Voices for Present Times.*

London: Zed Books, 2004.

Max Elliott Katz



David Renton does not propose creating Marxist Heritage Month, but his *Dissident Marxism* attempts to offer up a usable past for young activists. During the anti-globalization protests of the late 1990s, Renton noticed that the activists, while full of passionate intensity, have no sense of history. To translate into the language of identity politics, the activists lack pride in their own heritage. They are not even sure what that heritage is. *Dissident Marxism* attempts to demonstrate how Marxism could serve as that heritage.

There is an obvious problem with such a project. For much of its history, Marxism operated as a craven justification for state coercion and control. The security of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" demanded the creation of the Gulag Archipelago, and the construction of the Berlin Wall. Stalinist "scientific socialism" has little appeal to the Change-The-World-Without-Taking-Power generation. One strain of Marxism managed to resist deployment as state ideological apparatus: Trotskyism. But while many of the figures discussed in *Dissident Marxism* share a background in the Left Opposition and Fourth International, Renton insists his book is not a history of Trotskyism. Such a history would not instill anyone with pride in Marxism. Splits within splits, fractal sectarian lineages, recurrent rightward shifts, endlessly creative styles of opportunism, and cultish personal pathologies do not make for a workable heritage.

How to make a lovable history out of a seemingly unlovable ideology? Renton creates the category of "Dissident Marxism" and proceeds to offer portraits of fourteen alleged Dissident Marxists. We start off with some less "compromised" Bolsheviks (Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexandra Kollontai, and Anatoly Lunacharsky), progress through the orbit of early Trotskyism (Victor Serge and Georges Henein), and dip into the Marxist English historians (Dona Tarr and E.P Thompson.) From there, we take an extended detour through Third-Worldism and the Third World (Paul Sweezy, Paul Baran, and Walter Rodney), and finish up in the passionate and narrow world of Thatcherite Trotskyism (David Widgery). There are, for good measure, chapters on Karl Korsch and Harry Braverman.

At some vague level of abstraction, this is useful work. Through the stubborn recitation of biographical detail, we can keep the memory of the dead with us. But *Dissident Marxism* tries to be more than "mere" biography. Renton wants to cordon off fourteen dead Marxists, claim them as "dissidents," and offer them up to young activists as a "heritage." And there lies the problem.

To clump these figures together inflicts great violence to their individual positions and trajectories. Karl Korsch would not have recognized Walter Rodney's Pan-Africanism as Marxism of any sort. Renton insists that his figures all "opposed a global society that was baed on mass exploitation, and also rejected the two bureaucratized left-wing 'alternatives' of Stalinism and social democracy" (3). But this is to subsume fourteen radically different thinkers under the vague label of "anti-authoritarianism." Alexandra Kollontai recognized herself as an orthodox Marxist, and worked to defend the authority of the proletariat movement against "dissident" bourgeois feminism. Kollontai's defense of orthodoxy may appear heterodox today, but this is only a sign of how much has been lost.

But Renton misses the obvious: the near-total collapse of Marxism over the long 20th century. *Dissident Marxism* begins with Lunacharsky, the USSR's Commisar of Enlightenment, running the education system of a state of 200 million, and ends with David Widgery helping organize rock concerts to protest David Bowie's outlandish quasi-fascism. From power to protest, here is the history of Marxism's last century. Renton does not explain, or even acknowledge the regression. Nor could he. To recognize the radical loss of possibility means acknowledging that the Marxist legacy is fundamentally problematic. It means recognizing that Marxism may not be a heritage for young activists to take pride in.

But Marx did not intend to provide ideology for an activist minority. Communism, he argued, would be the first political movement of, by, and for the whole of humanity. It would be an *anti*-identity politics. The workers of the world come to recognize their own "class identity" as a kind of bondage. Being a "worker" means living in subjection. And so they organize, seize political power, overcome capitalism, abolish wage labor, and emancipate themselves and the rest of humanity.

This, at least, was Marxism, or a highly abbreviated version of it. It has, to the date, failed. If they study Marxism's history, young activists will find defeat, confusion, diminution, betrayal, and regression. This past will not "empower" any young activist. But perhaps this is the reason to study it.

Baron Münchhausen led a mildly exciting 18th century life. He joined the Czar's cavalry, and fought in the Russo-Turkish war. Late in life, Münchhausen transfigured these mildly exciting exploits into wild adventures. He claimed to have wrestled bears, pulled himself out of a swamp by his own bootstraps, and visited the moon twice. The actually existing Left suffers from political Münchhausen syndrome. Faced with powerlessness and creeping obsolescence, leftists find adventure and danger in the smallest demonstration, the most local causes. When actual revolution becomes unthinkable, everything becomes revolutionary.

If studying the history of Marxism proves disempowering, perhaps disempowerment will prove therapeutic. Study can puncture the delusions of the present, and make possible an honest self-reckoning. *Contra* Renton, such reflection will not serve the apparent needs of the present. But perhaps, with a little study, we come to serve the needs of the past. **IP**

IN 1926, HISTORIAN CARTER WOODSON inaugurated "Negro History Week." Negro History Week bred Black History Month, and Black History Month bred the many diverse "Heritage" months of our American calendar: Women's History Month, Asian Pacific Heritage Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, and American Indian Heritage Month, to pick just a few. But along the way, the justification for studying history changed. Woodson believed the study of black history could erode racism and cultivate the recognition of human equality. A black teenager studies the accomplishments of Benjamin Banneker and sees that whites have no monopoly on scientific capacities. For Woodson, history teaches the basic irrelevance of racial identity, it schools us in the universality of our shared powers. Contemporary heritage months work for the opposite goal. The point today is to see one's own specific minority "heritage" as source of power. A young woman studies Elizabeth Cady Stanton and learns to take pride in her womanhood.

Errata

In the article "The Poverty of Pakistan's Politics (PPP)" by Atiya Khan in the last issue, Manan Ahmed's name was misspelled throughout. The editor apologizes for this error.