

# Toward a Communist Analysis of Black Oppression And Black Liberation

## Part I: Critique of the Black Nation Thesis

by Linda Burnham and Bob Wing

### I. Introduction

#### A. Political Importance of the Question

For almost four hundred years, racism has pervaded every aspect of U.S. life, inexorably shaping the politics, economics, culture and social relations of this country from top to bottom.

The centrality of racism to the development of U.S. capitalism had its origin in the critical role played by racial slavery in the process of capital accumulation by which the U.S. bourgeoisie established its rule on this continent. The social relation of racism brought into being at that time remains to this day a central feature of the U.S. economy and class structure, as well as of the form and content of bourgeois class rule. Indeed, racism has become so deeply imbedded in the capitalist mode of production in the U.S. and so intertwined with all of the class relations characteristic of U.S. capitalism that they have become inseparable. Racism cannot be eliminated from U.S. society without the overthrow of the capitalist system and, by the same token, the rule of capital cannot be overturned unless the U.S. proletariat takes up the struggle against racism as an indispensable component of the class struggle in this country.

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While the working class does not as yet have this understanding, it is clear that the U.S. bourgeoisie does. For monopoly capital knows that the ghettos and barrios with their last-hired, first-fired wage slaves, massive unemployment, decaying slums, and reduced life expectancy, represent not only the most concentrated expression of the emiseration of the U.S. working class, but also a potent political force poised at the bourgeoisie's urban and industrial jugular.

Clarity on the source and nature of racism, then, is central to the forging of a revolutionary vanguard in the U.S. In the absence of a scientific understanding of this question, the communist movement will be unable to develop a correct general line for the U.S. revolution, nor will it be able to guide the development of the internationalist and anti-racist consciousness which will be crucial to the political and ideological remolding of the U.S. working class. Without such a remolding, this class will not be able to break with the most pernicious form of class collaboration which infects major portions of it—"white solidarity." That break is an indispensable condition for proletarian revolution in this country.

While the U.S. communist movement has, on occasion, recognized these facts and, at times, distinguished itself in the actual political struggle against racism, it has never actually developed a comprehensive theory and political line concerning the nature of racism and the struggle against it. Rather, it has utilized the framework of the *national* question and *national oppression* to explain the particular oppression of minority people in the U.S. and to develop a strategy and program for ending that oppression. This is especially true of theoretical work analyzing the nature of the oppression of Black people in the U.S., that particular question which lies at the heart of analyzing the oppression of all minority peoples in this country and the complexities of U.S. racism in general.

Of course, the national question framework is not the only analysis of Black oppression or racism in general that has had currency within revolutionary ranks. Other views, that Black people constitute a caste, a super-exploited section of the working class, an internal colony, etc. have enjoyed moments of popularity. But overwhelmingly the predominant view within the communist movement since 1930 has been that Black oppression is essentially a form of national oppression, that Black people constitute (or once constituted) an oppressed nation in the Black Belt South and an oppressed national minority in the rest of the country.

To this day, the Black Nation\* framework continues to hold sway as a theoretical construct within the communist movement. There are a number of reasons for this, not the least of which is the fact that the communist movement heretofore has not developed an alternative

\*"Black Nation" and "White Nation," as concepts particular to this polemic, are capitalized throughout this article.

framework—that is, a comprehensive theory of racism—which captures the revolutionary essence of the question. In the absence of such an alternative, the national framework—which was an advanced line at the time of its development—seems to many to be the only revolutionary approach to the question. This view is reinforced by the fact that in the past quarter century, struggles for national liberation in the colonial and semi-colonial world have been the focal point of the international class struggle so that the national framework tends to be associated with a revolutionary approach to any question.

But there is nothing inherently more advanced or more revolutionary about a national framework; and indeed, if that framework does not correspond to reality, it can easily give rise to a reactionary political line (Zionism is a prime example) or to an idealist and voluntarist line incapable of becoming a material force, let alone changing social reality.

In our view, the latter is the case with the Black Nation line and framework, especially as it is advanced today in the communist movement. Far from strengthening the capacity of the communists to lead the struggle for Black liberation, this line incorrectly targets the particular character of Black oppression and, consequently, offers an inadequate and inaccurate program to combat it. It fails to identify and analyze *racism* as the specific and decisive relation framing the oppression of Black people, viewing racism solely as an ideological phenomenon, a particular variant of national chauvinist ideology resting on the material basis of national oppression. Thus despite the fact that, all things considered, the Black Nation thesis has been the most advanced line on the question of Black oppression developed by the communist movement historically, that line must now be re-examined, critiqued, and replaced by a more accurate framework that incorporates its strengths while shedding its increasingly obvious and serious weaknesses.

## B. History of the Black Nation Line

The Black Nation line was originally adopted by the Communist International in the resolutions of its world congresses in 1928 and 1930. Prior to that time, the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) had no coherent line on the character of Black oppression, no comprehensive program for communist intervention and leadership in the anti-racist struggle, and little experience in such struggles. The great contribution of the Black Nation thesis, in this context, was its decisive break with the liquidationist approach that denied the fact that Black people were subjected to a form of oppression distinct from that of general working class exploitation, and considered special anti-racist demands detrimental to working class unity. In contrast, the Black Nation line recognized that Black oppression was a particular form of

oppression which required a comprehensive theoretical and historical analysis in its own right, a special political strategy and program to combat it. Additionally it highlighted the fact that the struggle against Black oppression was a revolutionary struggle, key to the U.S. revolution as a whole, and in the interest of the entire U.S. working class. Finally, the Black Nation thesis grasped the centrality of the plantation system and Jim Crow to the oppression of Black people at that time, exposed their cruelty and backwardness, and called for their overthrow.

In our view these crucial strengths, rather than the idea of a Black Nation per se, are what reoriented the CPUSA's work concerning Black liberation and propelled the party into the center of the anti-racist struggles of the 1930s and 1940s. In the main, the party's operative line was full and equal rights for Black people, and it is highly questionable whether the CPUSA ever implemented those aspects of its program, specifically the right of self-determination, that flowed directly from the Black Nation analysis.

Through the 1940s, as the plantation system was increasingly diminishing in importance within U.S. capitalism, the CPUSA engaged in sharp internal debate concerning the Black Nation line. In the main, the revisionist forces associated with Earl Browder rejected the thesis, while those struggling for a more revolutionary political line upheld it. In 1959, following the party's qualitative descent into modern revisionism, the Black Nation thesis was dropped. This change was dictated by the fact that reality had refuted the line's main propositions; the Black Nation thesis hinged on the view that the plantation system could never be broken up under capitalism, but by the 1950s the plantation system had indeed been demolished without so much as a hint of a let-up in the oppression of Black people. But the CPUSA offered no new and all-sided revolutionary position in its place. In fact, the party simply maintained the national framework without the Black Nation itself, considering Black oppression a "national question of a special kind." Ever since, the CPUSA's approach has been grossly eclectic, seizing upon the latest fashionable rhetoric describing the Black struggle to justify an essentially reformist line that continues to tail the moderate reformist leadership of the anti-racist movement.

The New Communist Movement of the late 1960s and early '70s (with a few minor exceptions) resurrected the Black Nation line. That line was seen by most forces in that movement as part and parcel of the critique of modern revisionism, especially since the period when the CPUSA held that line generally coincided with the time when it functioned as a revolutionary vanguard, while the period when the party dropped the line coincided with its descent into revisionism. Thus almost all New Communist Movement groups not only upheld some version of the Black Nation thesis, but viewed it as an indispensable aspect of their line of demarcation with revisionism.

In our view, this was a highly simplistic method of analysis which was neither a serious approach to political line development nor to the critique of revisionism. The fact that the party's abandonment of the Black Nation line coincided with its degeneration as a revolutionary party does not by itself prove the Black Nation thesis was or is correct. The CPUSA's revisionism on this question was reflected mainly, in our view, in its failure to consolidate around a new comprehensive and revolutionary line on Black liberation and its conciliation of the petit bourgeois and reformist elements in the anti-racist movement typified by the NAACP. In this case, as in many others, the New Communist Movement's refurbishment of an old line amounted to restoration rather than rectification.

Unfortunately, this primitive methodology has also been dominant within the anti-revisionist, anti-"left" opportunist trend, albeit with a slight twist. First, in a manner strikingly reminiscent of the New Communist Movement, many trend forces have settled for regurgitating the Black Nation line of the '30s and '40s without ever questioning the validity of its theoretical framework. Evidently this is supposed to take care of the anti-revisionist aspect of the line. Then, in a painless concession to reality, the view that the Black Nation still exists today is rejected. Evidently this is the "anti-dogmatist" or anti-"left" opportunist aspect of the line. Thus a seemingly anti-revisionist, anti-dogmatist line is pragmatically contrived without submitting the original Black Nation line to serious reappraisal, and without undertaking a study of Black history with a view to determining whether the line accurately reflects that history. This "new and improved" version of the Black Nation line holds that Black people were forged into a nation after the Civil War, a nation which then dissolved in the 1950s through the process of mechanization of Southern agriculture combined with Black outmigration, and that Blacks are now a national minority. Its most coherent expression is in the Philadelphia Workers' Organizing Committee's (PWOC's) *Black Liberation Today: Against Dogmatism on the National Question*.<sup>1</sup>

The political consequences of the PWOC line are nothing short of disastrous to the struggle against racism. Having removed the Black Nation from the present, but not the past, the PWOC has left the question of racism hanging in midair with no material underpinnings to it. What this view fails to grasp is that racist ideology does not exist in a vacuum. This ideology has a material foundation and is reproduced constantly by the oppressive social relation of racism which is imbedded in the very fabric of U.S. society so powerfully that it literally dictates different life destinies for people in this society along the color line.

### C. Toward an Alternative Framework

Since we believe that within the revolutionary movement the national framework stands as the chief theoretical obstacle to the development of a revolutionary line on Black oppression and Black liberation, the first part of this article concentrates on a critique of it.\* To accomplish this task, we will concentrate on the Black Nation thesis which was developed by the Comintern, held by the CPUSA, revived by most of the New Communist Movement, and which still influences our own trend as well. But our critique is not advanced in isolation from an alternative thesis which we believe is correct. This alternative thesis will make up the second part of this article which will appear in the next issue of *Line of March*.

For the moment, however, let us sketch out the main content of this alternative view. This is that Black oppression in the U.S. is a special form of capitalist oppression which is most accurately characterized as racial oppression, and that Black people in the U.S. are more accurately characterized as a racially oppressed people rather than a nationality or a nation.

We believe that this line of analysis most precisely captures the crucial theoretical/historical point that the oppression of Black people is a dynamic *internal* to U.S. capitalist development, and not *external* (i.e. the oppression of a Black Nation by a White Nation) as the Black Nation line portrays it. Historically and theoretically this is the main error of the Black Nation line. But if we understand that Blacks are a racially oppressed people, we then have the basis to grapple with the interconnection of racial and class oppression *within the same social formation*, whether in 1676, 1776, 1876, or 1976, and therefore to unravel the contradictions along the color line that thoroughly penetrate the U.S. working class.

Politically, the racial oppression analysis clearly shows that the

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\*This is not the first critique of the Black Nation thesis within the communist movement. Previous attempts, however, have either been seriously flawed or have dealt with only certain aspects of the line. In any event, no systematic struggle on this question has yet taken place within our trend. The present critique is, in great measure, an outgrowth and extension of an earlier *Critique of the Black Nation Thesis*<sup>2</sup> which was produced by the Racism Research Project and published in 1975. The authors of this article were both members of the Racism Research Project. While the Project's *Critique* clearly had shortcomings, it was the first major challenge to the theoretical premises of the Black Nation line. Its principal shortcoming was that it did not directly counter the Black Nation line as argued by Allen and Haywood, and thus failed to rebut their specific economic and historical arguments. In addition to its challenge to the Black Nation thesis, the *Critique* advanced some cogent initial opinions on a Marxist analysis of racism.

struggle against Black oppression not only "coincides" with the interests of the working class, but that it is critical to the U.S. working class struggle. Thus, contrary to the Black Nation line which sees Black people as "allies" of the working class, we view Black people as a racially oppressed section of the laboring masses (mainly the working class, but also the petit bourgeoisie) which has a superior material basis to grasp the working class interest as a whole. The struggle for Black liberation, therefore, is not a national liberation struggle to free an oppressed nation from imperialism (with whites as "supporters"), nor a democratic struggle against national minority oppression, but a struggle that is itself thoroughly anti-capitalist and which can only be won through the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. The Black liberation movement is not a national liberation movement, but a particular contingent of the people's movement against capital.

Ideologically, the racial oppression analysis avoids the two main pitfalls of the Black Nation line: its uncritical adoption of the segregationist logic that whites and Blacks are so inherently different that they could never be part of the same nationality, despite 400 years of history within the same social formation; and its unintended support for the racist claim that the immense productive power and wealth of the U.S. is the work and exclusive national claim of white people (the White Nation), while Blacks can only lay claim to the Black Belt South as their national heritage. The racial oppression analysis directly challenges the exclusive white claim to the American nationality and productive forces.

In our view, these are the life-and-death political and ideological stakes concerning the debate over whether Black oppression is racial or national in character. For these reasons alone, the critique of the Black Nation line would be an absolutely crucial task for the U.S. communist movement. However, the stakes in this line struggle go beyond even the particularity of Black oppression. On a more general level, the issue involved is whether the communist movement is going to develop a comprehensive theoretical and historical understanding of one of the most vicious forms of oppression which has developed in the era of capitalism, that of racism. Developing such a line is not only key to providing leadership to the struggle for Black liberation, but to understanding the nature of the oppression of all minority peoples in the U.S., to grasping the essential dynamics of U.S. capitalism as it has unfolded historically, and, indeed, to comprehending the depth and speed with which racism and racist ideology have become international phenomena. In this sense, the challenge before us as Marxist-Leninists is to forthrightly address and eventually decisively settle one of the most pervasive and complex problems of the U.S. and international class struggle in the present era of world history. As an initial step toward this end, we begin this two-part article with a critique of the Black Nation thesis.

## II. Summary of the Black Nation Thesis

The first task of our critique is to accurately reconstruct the Black Nation line in its most theoretically consistent and politically sophisticated form, without vulgarization or caricature. Reconstructing an incorrect line, however, is often not easy, for it can be eclectic, internally contradictory, inconsistent with Marxist theory, and based upon distortions of both history and present reality. This is certainly the case with the Black Nation thesis. Summarizing the thesis is particularly confusing because there are so many versions of it. The Communist Labor Party (CLP), for example, considers the "Negro Nation" to be a colony and demands independence for it.<sup>3</sup> The Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) thinks that the Black Nation is a "nation of a new type," a "proletarian nation" consisting of the Black communities scattered throughout the U.S.<sup>4</sup> The Communist Party (M-L) (CP[M-L])<sup>5</sup> and the League of Revolutionary Struggle (M-L) (LRS)<sup>6</sup> hold to the view that there is an oppressed Black Nation in the Black Belt section of the South. Finally, PWOC upholds the Black Belt nation view, but says that the nation dissolved in the 1950s when the plantation system was broken up by industrialization and the majority of Black people migrated to the North and to the cities of the South.<sup>7</sup>

That a line would give rise to so many versions is itself a signal that something is awry. The proliferation of "interpretations," "improvements," and "updates" is a sure indication that a line lacks an objective basis, thus giving free reign to subjectivism.

Despite the numerous variations, however, it is possible to identify the common foundation of the Black Nation thesis upon which all versions rest. Following the Comintern resolution of 1930,\* they all hold that (1) a nation was formed among Black people in the Black Belt section of the South in the aftermath of the betrayal of Reconstruction; (2) that this all-Black Nation is an oppressed nation within the U.S. multi-national state; (3) that this nation exhibited all the features of a nation as defined by Stalin, namely it was an historically constituted, stable community of people with a common economy, territory, language, and culture; and (4) that communists should uphold the right of this oppressed Black Nation to self-determination.

This is the basic substance of the Black Nation thesis which we will attempt to critique, thereby knocking the foundation out of all the variations of the thesis.\*\*

\*Excerpts reprinted at the end of this article.

\*\*CLP's rendition of the Black Nation is based on a different historical analysis than the others. They hold that the South was a nation prior to the Civil War and that the Civil War was actually a War for Southern Independence. Consequently a separate critique of this historical view is required eventually, although it is beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, the theoretical, economic, and

## A. Historical Exclusion of Blacks from the U.S. Nation

How is the Black Nation thesis argued? The general argument of the thesis is that two key historical developments at the end of the 1800s gave rise to the formation of the Black Nation. On one hand, Black people were excluded from democratic absorption into the U.S. nation by the bourgeoisie's betrayal of Reconstruction. On the other hand, a distinct national economy based on the plantation system was forged by the abolition of slavery, welding Black people into a separate Black Belt nation.

The argument begins by asserting that the exclusion of Black people from the U.S. nation initially took shape with the American Revolution, which accelerated the amalgamation of the various European peoples into a White U.S. Nation, but excluded Blacks from equal participation in this national formation. Instead, Blacks were left shackled in pre-capitalist slavery and denied the most basic bourgeois democratic rights.

The Civil War and Reconstruction together are viewed as a second bourgeois democratic revolution pitting the historically progressive Northern capitalist system against the moribund and backward Southern pre-capitalist plantation system. As in the French Revolution, the historic task of the Northern bourgeoisie in this second American Revolution was not only to abolish slavery, but to smash the pre-capitalist plantation system and distribute the land to the ex-slaves and other agricultural laborers. Only by destroying the plantation system could the Northern bourgeoisie smash the pre-capitalist Southern planters, establish undisputed political hegemony for itself, unify the national market, and clear all pre-capitalist remnants from the path of capitalist development.

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political aspects of the critique presented in this article are still largely applicable to the CLP's Negro Nation line. For the CLP's differences with the Comintern's 1928 and 1930 resolutions, see Nelson Peery, *The Comintern Position on the Negro Question: A Review of H. Haywood's Negro Liberation, Proletariat*, Vol. 2 No. 1, September 1976, pp. 25-44.

\*We will draw from several sources to reconstruct the thesis. The basic line was first formulated in the 1930 Comintern resolution. The bulk of the theoretical and historical elaboration was done by James S. Allen of the CPUSA in articles that appeared in *The Communist* throughout the 1930s. Much of it is summarized in his *Negro Question in the United States*, (New York: International Publishers, 1936). In 1948 Harry Haywood was commissioned by the party to summarize, refine, and update Allen's work after an internal debate reaffirmed the thesis, and it is his *Negro Liberation*, reprinted by Liberator Press, Chicago, 1976, through which most of the New Communist Movement became familiar with the Black Nation line. The most recent version is PWOC's *Black Liberation Today*. Since PWOC's line carries some influence in our developing Marxist-Leninist trend, we will pay special attention to it.

With this framework the thesis goes on to argue that the Northern bourgeoisie betrayed the bourgeois democratic revolution when it compromised with the planters in the Hayes-Tilden pact of 1877. Once again, Black people were left under the heel of the semi-feudal plantation system and excluded a second time from democratic absorption into the U.S. nation. The subsequent transformation from competitive capitalism to monopoly capitalism (imperialism) brought the bourgeoisie's progressive development to an end, thus removing the possibility of such absorption and leaving Blacks permanently outside the White Nation.

### B. Plantation System: Material Basis of the Black Nation

Meanwhile, according to the thesis, dramatic developments were occurring within the Black Belt that forged Blacks into a distinct nation of their own.

The driving force of this national formation was the cotton-producing plantation system. This system rested upon what is characterized as the semi-feudal oppression of Black people through the sharecropping system. The thesis holds that the chief exploiter and prop of the system was Northern finance capital. However, it stresses that the class differentiation among Blacks unleashed by the abolition of slavery was the key to the formation of the common economy of the Black Nation.

The plantation system is also said to have determined the common territory of the Black Nation—an historically constituted, stable, contiguous Black majority community that the Black Nation theorists call the Black Belt.\* This Black Belt included counties in Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Maryland, Texas, Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Florida, and Tennessee. Surrounding counties which had significant Black minority populations were called the "border territory".

### C. The Plantation as the Source of All Black Oppression

The thesis includes the notion of the "shadow of the plantation" as an explanation of the oppression of Black people outside the Black Belt. The plantation system was seen as the ultimate source of all Black oppression. The existence of the plantation system threatened all Blacks with the prospect of being returned to semi-feudal oppression and was itself the source of cheap Black labor for industry as well as the Jim Crow system that was adopted throughout the country. Haywood writes:

"And the prime condition for the continuance of this policy in the

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\*The term "Black Belt" is an historical name referring to the color of the soil in a particularly fertile section of the South. The Black Nation theorists appropriated this historical term but changed its meaning to refer to the area of Black majority population.

North [of racism, Jim Crow and division of the working class] is the preservation of the system of medieval torture of the black peasantry of the South, from whose degraded and poverty-ridden ranks the 'special reserve' is constantly replenished, to threaten with the direness of plantation hunger the living standard of the entire nation."<sup>8</sup>

The "shadow of the plantation" also caught Southern whites in its web and was the basis of the reactionary political alliance between Wall Street and the Southern planters and capitalists.

In sum, the plantation was the source and main content of Black oppression and part of the common economic life that welded Black people into a nation in the Black Belt. Because the plantation system was the vehicle by which Northern finance capitalists exploited the Black masses in the Black Belt, the Black Nation was an oppressed nation. Moreover, it was thought that the plantation system could never be decisively broken up under capitalism. This was due to the interest of finance capital in exploiting the plantation system as well as to the moribund character of capitalism in its imperialist stage. Consequently the resolution of Black oppression was viewed as a revolutionary question. Racism and white supremacy were seen as particular expressions of the ideology of national oppression of the White U.S. Nation over the oppressed Black Nation.

### D. Political Program and Strategy

What was the revolutionary program and strategy of the Black Nation line in the '30s and '40s?

In essence the thesis proposed a two-stage revolutionary strategy to liberate the Black Nation, similar to those that have been successful from Vietnam to Mozambique over the last 35 years.\* The first stage would

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\*The Black Nation theorists have advanced a number of different programs and strategies through the years. In our opinion, the most all-sided and revolutionary one was that outlined in the Comintern resolution of 1930 and elaborated in James Allen's book. Allen discusses the meaning and strategy for achieving the right of self-determination at length. He also advances the party's general line for proletarian revolution in the U.S. and the relation of the national liberation struggle of the Black Nation to it. None of the other versions do any of these things. In fact, after 1935 the CPUSA reduced the right of self-determination to a secondary slogan, promoting the demand for equal rights to primary position. In 1944 Browder announced that the Black Nation had already exercised its right of self-determination, opting for integration, thus liquidating the slogan altogether. The line was reasserted after Browder's dismissal, but never regained its former prominence. Haywood's book, for example, makes no attempt to develop a strategy to achieve self-determination and does not seriously discuss its relation to proletarian revolution in the U.S. He focused instead on immediate demands, intermediate solutions, etc. None of the various New Communist groups have fashioned a coherent strategy or tactics.

complete the frustrated bourgeois democratic revolution by defeating U.S. (white) imperialism and semi-feudalism. The political essence of this revolution would be the winning of full democracy, concretely the winning of the right of the Black Nation to self-determination. Its economic essence would be the anti-feudal destruction of the plantation system and the distribution of the land to the tenants and farmers. The overall goal was the establishment of a Negro republic, either independent or federated to the U.S. on the basis of equality, under the democratic dictatorship of the peasants and workers of the Black Belt.

Soon after the victory of the national democratic revolution, however, a second, socialist, phase must be undertaken in order to consolidate the revolution against the inroads and manipulations of U.S. imperialism. Thus the leading role in the revolution must be played by the multi-national proletariat of the Black Belt in close alliance with the peasantry (tenant farmers).

In line with the "shadow of the plantation" thesis, the successful national democratic revolution in the Black Belt South would also remove the ultimate source of Black oppression in the North and the non-Black Belt South. However, the specific demand for the Black national minority within the White U.S. Nation was to be the struggle for "equal rights." This demand was aimed against all forms of national discrimination faced by Blacks outside the Black Belt. But the qualitative resolution of Black oppression depended on the liberation of the Black Nation and the destruction of the plantation system in the South.

The national democratic revolution of the Black Nation was not considered dependent upon the success of the proletarian revolution in the White Nation. However it was considered the most important particular feature of the proletarian revolution in the U.S., and was therefore central to the general line of the CPUSA (a line of argument similar to the relationship of the British proletariat to the question of Ireland's liberation).

That general line called for a strategic alliance between the multi-national proletariat and the Negro people (meaning the Black Nation) to smash their common enemy, U.S. imperialism. Their struggles would inevitably aid one another. The national liberation struggle of the Black Nation would be a peasant war against U.S. imperialism, while the proletarian revolution would be a class war against the same enemy. The key to forging the unity between these two revolutionary forces would be the recognition by the oppressor nation's proletariat of the right of self-determination of the Black Nation. Only by recognizing that right would the white proletariat separate itself from the imperialist interests of its "own" bourgeoisie and renounce the white chauvinist ideology of national oppression. Indeed, the thesis argued that even once the U.S. proletarian revolution was victorious, the right of self-determination of the Black Nation should still be upheld so that the nation could freely

choose its national destiny, either as an independent nation or as an equal partner in a U.S. multi-national state.

Now that we have reconstructed the main features and logic of the Black Nation thesis, we will set out to prove that it is incorrect and has been since its inception. In order to lay a firm foundation for the critique, we will review in Section III those aspects of the Marxist theory on the national question relevant to our discussion of the Black Nation thesis. Then we will indicate some of the departures from historical materialism that the Black Nation thesis resorts to in order to prove its case, particularly in its muddling of the distinction between the nation/national oppression framework and the particular question of racism. Sections IV and V will demonstrate that there never was a Black national territory or economy, respectively, and that the Black Nation thesis invented them by distorting both historical fact and Marxist theory. We will also dispute the thesis' notion that the post-Civil War plantation system was semi-feudal. In Section VI we will attempt to uncover the bourgeois historical myths of the Black Nation thesis' version of U.S. history. And in Section VII of this article we evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the political strategy of the thesis.

### III. The Marxist Theory of the National Question and the Black Nation Thesis

#### A. Source of the Comintern's Errors

The first general point of our critique is that the Black Nation thesis is based on fundamental departures from the Marxist theory of the national question.

Since this thesis was developed under the aegis and with the full authority of the leading center of the international communist movement, the Comintern, the charge that it departs from Marxist theory is not made lightly. In fact, we believe that it is necessary to understand why the Comintern could have made a theoretical error of this magnitude.

In our view, the impulse behind the Black Nation thesis was a good one. It spoke to the fact that the Comintern, contrary to the leadership of the CPUSA at the time, saw Black oppression as a central question of the U.S. revolution and a revolutionary question in its own right. In seeking a theoretical framework for the question, the Comintern clearly generalized from the communist movement's own advanced experiences in giving leadership to movements of oppressed peoples—both in Russia and in the colonial/semi-colonial world. Those experiences, by and large, were based on the liberation struggles of oppressed nations. By applying this framework to Black oppression in the U.S., it certainly appeared that the question was finally being placed on a revolutionary foundation.

But if the political impulse was sound, the theoretical work was not. Inevitably the attempt to impose the national framework on the social reality of Black oppression in the U.S. encountered the stubborn fact that Black people in the U.S. are not and never have been a nation. Unfortunately the seemingly revolutionary implications of the Black Nation line blinded the Comintern's theorists to its theoretical shortcomings. At the time, this error may not have seemed a grave one. And certainly the line introduced a militancy and revolutionary ardor into communist ranks around this question that hitherto had been sorely lacking. But as time went on and the demand for the right of self-determination became increasingly inoperative as a political force, the distortions in the theory became increasingly apparent. Ultimately, as life itself began to produce spontaneously revolutionary movements among the Black masses, the line became historically irrelevant and gained virtually no following outside the communist movement.\*

## B. Marxist Theory of the National Question

The Marxist theory of the national question was principally developed not by Marx and Engels but by Lenin and Stalin. In the pre-imperialist era, the national question was still principally a bourgeois question; that is, its focus was the striving of a distinct national bourgeoisie in a number of European multi-national states to exercise political and economic control over their own domestic market. Marx and Engels addressed the legitimacy of certain of these national movements—particularly those in Ireland and Poland—but they never developed a more generalized theory beyond noting that the modern nation-state is the particular form

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\*Most Black Nation theorists consider Black nationalist movements to be indirect proof of the existence of a Black Nation and such movements undoubtedly were part of the impulse of both the origins of the Black Nation line in the 1920s (the Garvey movement) and its resurrection in the 1970s (the Black Power movement). Nationalist movements are usually progressive calls for solidarity among Black people in the face of racism, and not all of them project the notion of a Black Nation. Indeed, few nationalists think that a Black Nation with a common territory, economy, culture and language has ever existed, even though they may call for building one in the future. The nationalist reference to the Black Nation is largely a spiritual rather than materialist one, and almost always includes all Black people, not just those in the Black Belt South. In fact, Black nationalist movements have usually originated and found their principal base in the Northern cities. The most powerful nationalist movement of all was led by a Jamaican, Marcus Garvey, and posited the future Black Nation to be in Africa. Real nations do not claim national territories located halfway around the globe on a space inhabited by millions of people. In this sense, Black nationalist movements may well be considered evidence of the absence of a Black Nation in the Black Belt South, rather than proof of its existence.

of political organization corresponding to the capitalist mode of production.

But with the development of imperialism, the principal focus of the national movements shifted away from Europe and to the colonial and semi-colonial world. With this development, the national question assumed a revolutionary significance and objectively became a proletarian question. The colonies, earlier objectively a strategic reserve of the bourgeoisie, became a strategic reserve of the proletariat. The failure of the majority of the leaders of the Second International to grasp this development, in fact their chauvinist policy of supporting their "own" bourgeois governments in a war, World War I, whose principal aim was the redivision of the world among the imperialist powers, was a central factor in the demarcation ultimately made between Marxism and revisionism, Leninism and Kautskyism, the Third International and the Second International.

It was as a result of these and related line struggles within Russia that Lenin and Stalin wrote extensively on the national question and developed the principal theoretical constructs which make up the basic Marxist theoretical framework on this question.

We have made this slight historical excursion because the Black Nation thesis has at times been challenged by those who assert that the Marxist theory of the national question is itself unsound. This is not our point of departure. We believe that the work done by Lenin and Stalin on the national question represents an important addition to the science of historical materialism. We base our theoretical critique of the Black Nation thesis on its departures from that theory, as well as on its distortions of other scientific Marxist categories.

There are, of course, many aspects to the Marxist theory of the national question. In what follows, however, we have limited our discussion to those aspects that are directly related to the Black Nation line and our critique of it.

### 1. What is a Nation?

What is a nation? This is a most fundamental theoretical issue as this seemingly simple concept is packed with political significance. On the answer to this question rests a judgment as to the political character of various national movements, no small matter in a period of intense national liberation struggle. The denial of a real nation's existence in the age of imperialism leads to national chauvinism and class collaboration. A party with an incorrect line in such circumstances can never successfully lead a national liberation struggle and guide such a struggle along a revolutionary path. On the other hand, the assertion that a non-national formation (a national minority, a racial group, etc.) is a nation can also lead to quite reactionary political programs. A party with an

incorrect line of this kind inevitably will become irrelevant to the actual motion of politics on this and related questions.

Stalin's famous but much abused definition provides a solid historical and materialist grounding to the question. That definition begins by situating the development of nations historically:

"A nation is not merely a historical category but a historical category belonging to a definite epoch, the epoch of rising capitalism. The process of elimination of feudalism and development of capitalism is at the same time a process of constitution of people into nations."<sup>9</sup>

In essence, the nation is the normal economic and political unit of the formation, development, and struggle of classes in the capitalist mode of production. In primitive communism, the unit of the mode of production was the commune or tribe; in ancient slavery it was the estate; under feudalism it was the domain or fief. Under capitalism the unit of the class formation is, generally speaking, the nation. Lenin describes the process:

"Capitalism's broad and rapid development of the productive forces calls for large, politically compact and united territories, since only here can the bourgeois class—together with its inevitable antipode, the proletarian class—unite and sweep away all the old, medieval, caste, parochial, petty-national, religious and other barriers."<sup>10</sup> (emphasis in original)

Because the main classes which comprise the class formation of the capitalist mode of production—the bourgeoisie and the proletariat—only develop and mature within nations, the class struggle under capitalism generally assumes a national form. There is no such thing as class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat "in general"; it always takes place within a given nation or between nations (e.g., the U.S. bourgeoisie or the Cuban proletariat, etc.). Nations are the terrain of the class struggle in the capitalist epoch. This is why the national question is so central to the proletarian revolution.

It is only within this context that the significance of Stalin's famous "four features" can be properly understood. To emphasize a materialist understanding of the nation, Stalin said:

"A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture."<sup>11</sup> (emphasis in original)

Capitalism is a powerful system of generalized commodity production that breaks up pre-capitalist economic formations, regionally distinct economies and peoples, and forges them into a single unified system of class and market relations under its hegemony. Capitalist production is a powerful integrating force that *amalgamates* pre-capitalist peoples and

communities into unified nations, and assimilates immigrants into the new nationality (e.g. the amalgamation of Bretons, Gauls, Teutons, etc. into the French nation, or the assimilation of Irish, Italian, and other immigrants into the "American" nationality). To quote Lenin:

"For the complete victory of commodity production, the bourgeoisie must capture the home market, and there must be politically united territories whose population speaks a single language, with all obstacles to the development of that language and its consolidation in literature eliminated."<sup>12</sup>

Thus these four features are necessary to the form of community that each distinct capitalist class formations creates. It is sheer idealism to speak of a nation without a common capitalist economy driving it forward, without a definite territory upon which that economy functions, without a common language that facilitates commodity production and exchange, or without a common culture being forged in the process. However, the existence of these characteristic features is not in itself proof of a nation apart from the larger historical drama of the rise of a distinct capitalist social formation.

A nation, then, is the product of a distinct and historically definite capitalist class formation internal to itself. This is true even for nations that develop as by-products of capitalist colonialism or imperialism, as did most of the nations of the Americas and Africa. Lacking such an internal formation, a colony or neo-colony may never become a nation, but instead might remain a country consisting of many tribal groups, might develop into a multi-national state, or might be amalgamated into a larger nation. Not all colonies or settlements become nations; this is determined by the nature of the internal class formation that takes place in the course of foreign capitalist penetration.

To hasten the process of capitalist development and formation, every national bourgeoisie strives to forge a nation-state that can bring its political and economic force to bear on the situation. But nations and states are qualitatively distinct, the one being the unit of capitalist class formation and the other being a concentrated expression of the political power of a nation's ruling class. Sometimes the nation and the nation-state coincide, e.g., the French nation and the French nation-state. But often they do not. Some nations are federated under one multi-national state as in the Soviet Union. Other nations have been artificially divided under the rule of two different states, as in Korea. And sometimes there are states that do not coincide to nations at all, such as the early colonial states of the Americas and Africa.

## 2. National Oppression

The *material basis* for national oppression is the uneven economic development of capitalism. However, although some nations are more

economically developed than others at any given point in history, uneven development in itself does not give rise to national oppression. The driving force of national oppression is the capital relation itself, which is both exploitative (surplus-value producing) and expansive (accumulation of capital). Thus the bourgeoisie of the more developed nations oppress and exploit the labor, raw materials, and markets of others. National rivalry (inter-capitalist competition) and national oppression are therefore inherent in capitalism.

Since a nation is no more nor less than the unit of class formation under capitalism, the form and content of the national question changes according to the stage of development of capitalism and the class struggle. In the period of the triumph of capitalism over feudalism (roughly the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries), the national movement of both oppressed and oppressor nations were part of the worldwide development of the capitalist system and were led by the bourgeoisie. In the era of imperialism, the principal content of the national question is the struggle against imperialism by the oppressed nations, colonies, and neo-colonies. These national movements are driven forward by the proletariat and peasantry and are part of the overthrow of imperialism and the transition to socialism. In the lower stage of communism—socialism—national contradictions continue but on a qualitatively different basis since the driving force of national oppression, capitalist private property, has been overthrown. In fact, the development of socialist construction actually requires international solidarity.

### 3. The Right of Nations to Self-Determination

In all periods, communists fight against national oppression and for national equality. More specifically, Marxist-Leninists demand the right of self-determination for oppressed nations, whether colonies, neo-colonies, or oppressed nations within multi-national states.

The right of self-determination is not a moral imperative against all oppression. It is a scientific demand that applies only to oppressed nations. Specifically, the right of self-determination is a democratic political demand that means that nations have the right to determine their own future free of outside interference, including the right to secede and form a separate national state.

The democratic demand of the right of self-determination does not directly speak to the question of which class will rule in the liberated nation. The proletariat of the oppressed nation advances this demand because it is being exploited principally by the oppressor nation's bourgeoisie and because national oppression is a fetter on the free and full development of classes and class struggle under capitalism. Even if the bourgeoisie is able to seize the leadership of the national liberation struggle, its victory opens the way for the further development of the

proletariat as a class and clears the terrain for the proletariat to face off directly with its "own" bourgeoisie.

The oppressed national bourgeoisie, however, also unites with the demand for the right of self-determination, because national oppression also hinders its class development and aims. It is out to expand its capital, by dominating its "own" national market and its "own" proletariat. Other oppressed classes such as the petit bourgeoisie and peasantry also unite with this demand, as their class interests are also hindered by imperialism.

On the other hand, the oppressor nation bourgeoisie opposes the right of nations to self-determination because it is contrary to its class interests in exploiting as much of the world's labor, raw materials, and markets as possible. But the oppressor nation proletariat's interest coincides with the right of self-determination for oppressed nations because this is a blow to the bourgeoisie's class interests and because it promotes unity with the proletariat's class comrades in the oppressed nations.

The *exercise* of the right of self-determination is not the same as the right itself. In colonies and neo-colonies there is only one way to exercise the right of self-determination—through winning independence. But an oppressed nation within a multi-national state can exercise this right either by forming an independent state or by federating with other nations on the basis of equality (including the former oppressor nation) in a multi-national state. In general, federation provides more favorable conditions for the rapid development of the productive forces and international working class solidarity. But which path should be chosen can only be determined by assessing which would best advance the interests of the international proletariat in the concrete circumstances of the class struggle at the given time and place.

As a *democratic* political demand, the right of self-determination is subordinate to the *class* demands of the international proletariat. Consequently, the proletariat does not support a national movement or independence struggle without examining which class stands to benefit by it in the long and short run. For example, the international proletariat would never support a bourgeois-led national independence struggle from a multi-national socialist country. Each national movement has to be assessed in its impact on the international class struggle.

### C. Theoretical Errors of the Black Nation Thesis

The Black Nation thesis makes a number of serious departures from historical materialism in its application of certain scientific categories such as common territory and common economy to the particularities of Black people in the U.S. These will be gone into at some length in subsequent sections.

For the moment, however, we want to direct our attention to two fundamental errors which speak to the thesis overall.

## 1. Metaphysics in Method

A common departure from Marxism made in connection with the Black Nation thesis—an error made both by its theorists and even more by the defenders of its resurrection—is a metaphysical approach that makes an ahistorical checklist application of Stalin's definition of a nation. This method transforms the common features of a nation identified by Stalin into absolute criteria, and then sets out to prove that Black people meet these criteria and therefore “qualify” for nationhood.

While Haywood adopts this approach in somewhat disguised fashion, the PWOC overtly views national formation as a quantitative process of accumulating features.

“By the time of the American Revolution a firm basis for Black nationhood had been formed. . . . They inhabited a common territory, the Black Belt\*. . . possessed a common language and a common psychological make-up. . . . However, at this point in time the Black people did not constitute a nation. The essential ingredient of *economic cohesion* was absent.”<sup>13</sup> (emphasis in original)

This missing “ingredient,” says PWOC, was added after the Civil War at which point the national formation thereby became complete.

This approach confuses *necessary* conditions of nationhood with *sufficient* conditions. What Stalin said is that “*It is only when all these characteristics are present together that we have a nation.*”<sup>14</sup> (emphasis in original) This is not the same as saying that any entity that exhibits these characteristics is by that fact a nation.\*\*

Those features which a nation necessarily exhibits are not always what is sufficient to make a nation. For historical materialism, what is sufficient to define a socio-historical entity can only be historical practice itself; characteristics and criteria are merely a highlighted theoretical recognition of practice. To assume otherwise is to fall into idealism. Moreover, to take dismembered abstractions such as criteria as a complete checklist toward a proof is to be metaphysical, since it removes social categories from social practice and invests them with a life of their own.

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\*It is part of the Black Nation thesis' mythology to posit the Black Belt as the “historic homeland” of Black people. In fact, most of the Black Belt was not settled for twenty to forty years after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803.

\*\*Such logic is capable of producing both odd and reactionary conclusions, for example, that South Korea is a nation because its inhabitants live in the same territory, speak the same language, participate in the same economy, and share a common culture, even though this “nation” is nothing but the creation of U.S. imperialism which severed the actual Korean nation in order to serve its own reactionary interests.

In fact, nations are not the only form of community that exhibit the four characteristic features. All communities that are the unit of a mode of production—tribes, fiefdoms, estates, communes, etc.—also share these four features. What is particular to nations is not the four necessary characteristics, but the particular historical practice that produces those features as a unity—the formation of distinct capitalist social formations.

## 2. The Black Nation Thesis and Racism

The basic theoretical error of the Black Nation thesis is its transposition of what is really a racial question into a national question.

The thesis starts out by trying to analyze the condition of a people who have been defined by an oppressive society on a racial basis and ends up declaring that people to be a nation. Such playing with categories actually solves nothing. For what is clear is that it is not the denial of “their nation” which is at the heart of Black oppression but an all-sided system of oppression throughout the U.S. based on placing all Black people into a racial category.

But, say the Black Nation theorists, “race” is an unscientific category. Therefore to speak of racial oppression is equally unscientific. “Race theories. . . are mere matters of convenience for imperialism. They have no scientific basis. . . .”<sup>15</sup> (Peery) “Biological characteristics are in no sense primary or basic, i.e., they explain exactly nothing about the situation of the American Negro.”<sup>16</sup> (Allen) “Everywhere in the world, a study of the national question reveals the use of these differences by the ruling bourgeoisie as the foundation for its strategy of ‘divide and rule,’ of fomenting strife and friction between the toilers of various nationalities.”<sup>17</sup> (Haywood)

Of course it is true that there is no such thing as “race” in biology or genetics. Natural science has long since disposed of all racial theories which identify skin color or any other physical characteristic of human beings as a matter of anything but the most superficial description. There is only one “race”: the human race.

But simply because the category of race does not exist *in nature* does not mean that it does not exist as a *real social relation*. In this, the category race is not at all unique. Clearly, capital does not exist in nature either. And yet the capital relation is the central relation of the capitalist mode of production. That there is a complex, elaborate and all-sided set of oppressive social relations based on skin color in the U.S. today—and that this has been the case ever since the earliest settlements on these shores—is a fact so obvious that even the most abject apologist for this system would not deny it.

The error made here is actually a common one. Involved is the problem of what Marx called “commodity fetishism.” Under generalized commodity production (capitalism), Marx wrote, “a definite

social relation between men. . . assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things," thus making capitalist social relations seem inherent in nature.<sup>18</sup>

The commodity so fetishized by capital obviously was not a *natural* category. It was totally the creation of social practice and assumed a historically significant form under capitalism. Did this make it unreal or unscientific?

Race and racial oppression are real, scientific social categories. Given the pervasiveness of the social relations of racial oppression in our society, these relations appear to be inherent in the biological diversity of humankind. Science can dispose of the *idea* that race is a natural division of humanity. But it cannot dispose of the racist social relation which has been brought into being by capitalism and which can only be eliminated by the destruction of that social formation. The task of Marxism is not to morally condemn (much less ignore) unscientific bourgeois categories, but rather to analyze them scientifically in order to expose the historically developed oppressive relations they represent and to develop a strategy that will enable the proletariat and the oppressed to smash them.

In fact, the Black Nation thesis actually refutes itself by implicitly admitting the reality of racial oppression, not in a straightforward manner, but by defining its oppressed nation strictly in racial terms. For the Black Nation it has purported to find is composed only of people already defined by the social practice of racism as Black. This is the fundamental flaw in the Black Nation thesis. For as Stalin points out, a nation is not a racial group or a tribal group.

The Black Nation thesis directly contradicts this distinction, using racial categories to define its nations and nationalities. To quote Haywood, "Within the borders of the United States, and under the jurisdiction of a single central government, there exists not one, but two nations: a dominant white nation with its Anglo-Saxon hierarchy and a subject black one."<sup>19</sup>

The Black Nation thesis adopts an absolute color criteria to determine which nation or nationality a person belongs to. All Blacks are automatically part of the "Black nationality" either as inhabitants of the Black Nation or as Black national minorities within the White Nation, even if neither they nor their ancestors ever lived in the Black Belt. All white people are automatically part of the "white nationality" either as inhabitants of the White Nation or as white national minorities within the Black Nation, regardless of whether they or their ancestors ever lived outside of the Black Belt. Assimilation of whites into the Black Nation or of Blacks into the White Nation is, by their definition, impossible. Even recent immigrants are duly assigned to the proper nation according to their color. In other words, the Black Nation thesis defines nations and nationalities by "race," irrespective of the material conditions and

history in which people are shaped! This is a blatant departure from historical materialism which understands that one's nationality is determined by history, not by color.

Indeed, the Black Nation line bows to the prevailing racist logic that Black folks and white folks are so inherently different that they could never be part of the same nation or nationality regardless of the facts of history. The thesis has merely sanitized this segregationist, biological-determinist line by the use of progressive-sounding terms like nation and nationality, holding that nations and nationalities in the U.S. are the exclusive province of one racial group or another, irrespective of the common conditions and history of whites and Blacks within the class structure. The thesis also capitulates to the racist claim that the great wealth and productive power of the U.S. is principally the work and "property" of white people by promoting the reactionary notion of a White Nation and relegating the national claim and heritage of Blacks to the most backward section of the country.

These, in brief, are the ideological implications of confusing a racial group with a nationality. Yet, as we will demonstrate in the following pages, this fundamental theoretical error runs through the Black Nation line, from its adoption of racial rather than national criteria to determine who is a member of the supposed Black Nation, to its method of determining (actually inventing) that nation's common territory and common economic life. That this error should so pervade the line is only further testimony of the degree to which racism and the unconscious use of racial categories has pervaded U.S. life, penetrating even into the theoretical work and political consciousness of the communist movement itself.

#### IV. The Black Belt—Common Territory of the Black Nation?

Black Nation theorists all locate the genesis of the Black Nation in that area of the South in which Blacks make up a majority of the population and which more or less coincides with the plantation system. In this section we will critique this "classic" version of the territory argument which was elaborated by James Allen and adopted by most groups since then.

Since the time of Stalin's polemics against the proponents of cultural national autonomy, Marxist-Leninists have recognized that a nation must have evolved and must exist on a definite piece of territory. Stalin's *Marxism and the National Question* was written largely to combat the metaphysical notion that a nation was merely a unity of individuals on the basis of national character or a "common destiny" without regard to common territory or economic ties. The insistence on common territory as a requisite feature of all nations was central to the break with idealism and subjectivism on the national question.

Land, along with the resources in it and on it, is the primary object of labor in the struggle of humans to wrest from nature the means for the subsistence and reproduction of the community. In all modes of production the community exists and is defined by some definite relationship to the land. The territory of a given social formation is determined by the land base across which it extends its production relations, before bumping up against its geographical limits as determined by the size of the population, the level of the productive forces, natural boundaries or the existence of another social formation. Territory is linked intimately to the historical development of the economic relations and material conditions of existence of a community of people. This link is reflected and expressed in the fierce defense of territory as the basis for the existence of various social formations and thoroughly infuses all the cultural and historical references held in common by a given people.

In the capitalist era the essential dynamic remains the same. A geographical area becomes the territory of a nation based on the capacity of a particular capitalist class to draw in and amalgamate various peoples into the production relations of capitalism and, as part of that process, to annex the territory upon which their self-contained, independent existence was previously carried out.

In its attempts to extend capitalist relations and capture a wider and wider market, the bourgeoisie runs up against natural limits (oceans and mountain ranges, for example), pockets of resistance to amalgamation from other pre-capitalist social formations, the incapacity to economically and militarily secure the integration of a particular area, or the conflicting interests of another nation, another bourgeoisie. It is the resolution of these contradictions which arise from various factors over an extended historical period that determine the boundaries of the territory of a given nation.

The determination of the territory of the Black Nation turns this historical process on its head. Rather than beginning with an analysis of the historical relations that served to integrate various peoples into a single national economic system, with the territorial limits set by the capacity of that system for expansion and consolidation, the Black Nation thesis begins by predetermining the identity of the nationals according to a racial criteria and then claiming the areas in which these "nationals" are a majority population as the national territory.

Allen, the first Black Nation theorist to identify the territory of the nation with any precision, searched through the 1930 census tracts, began with clear majority counties and then included enough non-majority counties so that the territory was not a patchwork but contiguous and so that the whole contained a majority Black population. The result of this was a stretch of contiguous counties in which Blacks constituted 50.3% of the population in 1930. This stretch of land is said

to be the Black Belt and the territory of the Black Nation. "In determining this area (the Black Belt) the counties of clear Negro majority have been used as a basis for a broader and continuous area, within which are to be found isolated counties or groups of counties which do not have Negro majorities."<sup>20</sup> In addition to the Black Belt, Allen identifies an area surrounding it called the "border territory" which was 28.8% Black according to the 1930 census. The political or economic significance of this so-called border territory is not clarified. Thus, the main basis for calling the Black Belt the territory of the Black Nation is that it was the area of continuous Negro majority.

This method of determining a national territory is erroneous on two counts. First, it relies on a non-national factor—i.e., racial categorization—in determining the area of majority. Second, the use of the criteria of areas of majority population is itself flawed when used as the basis for drawing the borders of a nation.

The counties targeted by Allen are those that have a majority of a particular racial group. The Black Belt is the area inhabited by an aggregate of individuals who are *Black* and who, taken together, make up over half of the population. In other words, a racial (non-national) criteria is used as the means to identify individuals and then the area where they are concentrated is called a national territory. This creates a complete muddle of the category nation. Nations may include various ethnic groups or races or be racially homogeneous, but race is not a determinant of nationality. This error is part and parcel of the fundamental theoretical error of the Black Nation thesis—the transposition of the Black racial group into a Black nationality. In Allen's argumentation for the Black Belt as the territory of the nation the question of majority population plays a central role.

"... there does exist an area of *continuous* Negro majority. The census figures are necessarily based upon percentages of population within each county taken singly. But populations do not stop short at county or state lines. . . . By retabulating, according to location of the county, the census data on population in the South it is possible to establish accurately and definitely a continuous area in which the Negroes constitute the majority of the population."<sup>21</sup> (emphasis in original)

Each restatement of the Black Nation line is accompanied by countless maps and population tables as though the sheer weight of empirical data could bring the nation into being.

Census data are certainly useful in providing a statistical summary of those aspects of social relations that get reflected in population shifts. But according to the Black Nation thesis, the census figures themselves are supposed to prove the existence of the territory. This is going at it the wrong way around. The boundaries of a national territory are determined

by the historical practice that takes place upon it, especially the formation of a distinct capitalist economic life. This historical practice may be reflected in statistics. But in the case of the Black Nation, the boundaries themselves are determined by a headcount.

The level of concentration of a given population is, of course, not a matter of indifference. And usually a national territory is inhabited, in the main, by its nationals. But to proceed by selecting one feature of part of a population (in this case a socially-determined racial category), identifying an area in which people having that feature are in the majority, and declaring that area a national territory, leaves the whole question of borders open to the most subjective and arbitrary manipulation. Constructing a national border in this way means that the border can shift with every increase or decrease in part of the population. If the Black population in an adjoining county rises above 50%, why not include it in the national territory? If the Black population of several counties falls, do those counties cease to be part of the national territory? Exactly this dilemma has led Black Nation theorists following Allen to quietly drop the Black majority criteria (without explicitly criticizing Allen) and leave the question of territory and borders quite vague.

Years later, for example, Haywood worked with the 1940 census which showed a decline in both the number of counties with majority Black populations as well as a decline in the overall percentage of Blacks from 50.3% to 48.7%, in the area Allen had designated as the Black Belt. Grasping the fact that if the criteria of majority Black population continued to be determinant, the boundaries of the national territory would inevitably shrink or lose their contiguousness altogether. Haywood therefore dropped the "area of continuous majority" so central to Allen's analysis, substituted for it the "area of Black concentration" and refused to even attempt to identify the borders of the Black Belt. According to Haywood:

"We make no attempt to rigidly fix the boundaries of the Black Belt. However, anyone not completely blinded by the present arbitrarily erected state and county lines can see that within the territory embraced by these counties there is a well-defined, compact and stable Negro community."<sup>22</sup>

The Black Nation thesis attempts to disguise its arbitrary method of determining the national territory of the Black Nation with two plausible but faulty arguments. First, the general coincidence of the Black Belt and the plantation system is asserted in an effort to ground the question of national territory in economic relations. Second, it is argued that the Black Belt has historically been the area of majority (or concentration) and will remain so.

To the first point we must make it clear that the national territory of the Black Belt is *not* determined by the area in which the political economy

of the plantation system prevailed. Rather, the Black Belt is the *portion* of that area in which there is a majority Black population. In other words, the economy of the region is not the principal determinant of the national territory. In fact, much of the South as a whole, and especially those counties surrounding the Black Belt which have economies in no way qualitatively different than that of the Black Belt itself, are not included in the territory because their inclusion would have knocked the percentage of Blacks below half. Allen himself, when speaking of the "border territory" says: "Needless to say, neither the composition of the population nor economic and social conditions alter suddenly at the borders of this territory."<sup>23</sup> So, while it is true that the development of the plantation system and the use of Black slave labor in Southern agricultural production were the basis for the concentration of Blacks in the region identified as the Black Belt, it is not true that the borders of the Black Belt are determined by the extent of the plantation economy.

On the question of the stability of the concentration of Blacks in the Black Belt, there are a number of points to be noted. The development of the plantation system in the larger region which included the Black Belt did impart particular features to the community of Blacks who shared a common historical experience in the area. Thus, the concentration of Blacks in the plantation system and the shared experience of oppression during slavery and after emancipation means that the Southern region of the U.S. has a unique significance for Black Americans. But there are other important facts about the Black Belt section of the South that call into question its historical significance to Black people.

First, much of the territory of the Black Belt was not settled until decades after the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 made it part of U.S. territory, whereas Blacks were held in slavery in the five Southern East Coast colonies since 1619. In fact, the Black Belt contained the majority of Blacks in the U.S. only from about 1860 until 1900, and this majority never exceeded 55.4% of the Black population. Second, Blacks were a "stable majority" *within* the Black Belt only from about 1860 to 1930, the decline beginning as early as 1880. The ongoing stability of the concentration of Blacks in the Black Belt was powerfully impacted by the push out of the South engendered by backward economic conditions, the political disenfranchisement of Blacks, and the rule by terror of the white population, as well as the pull to the urban North engendered principally by industrialization. Given all this, the claim that the Black Belt is the "historic homeland" of Black people in the U.S. is shaky at best.

The qualitative break-up of the plantation system in the 1940s and the 1950s forced Black Nation theorists to adjust their arguments for a common territory. They became ever more vague about borders and ever more slippery about the importance of majorities or concentrations in determining the location of the territory. In the main, however, this development did not lead to a careful re-examination of the line. Most

groups and parties in the New Communist Movement continued to consider the Black Belt the "historic homeland" of the nation, and to call for the right to secession and the formation of a separate state, in spite of the decline in population and the massive urbanization of Blacks. In deference to the population trends, however, the RCP created "a nation of a new type, under new conditions—a proletarian nation, dispersed throughout the U.S., but at the same time, concentrated within the urban industrial centers."<sup>24</sup> The CP (M-L) goes further and calls for regional autonomy in the Black ghettos of the U.S.—charitably called "urban centers."<sup>25</sup> Here the flight into idealism that both Lenin and Stalin so vigorously polemicized against is complete. And the logical contortions that are necessary to make the thesis fit changed reality are glaringly obvious.

Black Nation theorists may, perhaps, think that they are doing Black people a favor by granting a homeland created out of the census tracts and adding to it the decimated "urban centers" of the North. But the labor of Black people was a critical factor in the development of the U.S. as a whole—including every square inch of U.S. territory.

While it is true that exploitation in the plantation system of the Southern U.S. is at the core of the history of oppression of Black people in this country, the construction of a "homeland" on such a rigged up basis does nothing to mitigate that oppression. The real question is not whether Blacks should have the right to a territory whose boundaries are arbitrarily set by statistical nation-builders. This is simply a continuation of the disenfranchisement of Blacks at a higher "Marxist" level. The real struggle is to break the racist exclusive claim of whites to the U.S. nation, including its territory, whether that claim is blatantly asserted by explicitly racist forces, or unconsciously conciliated by "granting" Black people (actually ghettoizing them into) a "homeland" in a small and backward part of the U.S.

## V. On the "Common Economic Life" of the Black Nation

The key to the process of national formation is the development of a distinct capitalist socio-economic unit. The integration of people into a single class formation based upon their distinct but mutually dependent relationship to that society's means of production is the driving force of the amalgamation of distinct peoples into a single nation with a common language, culture, and territory. Further, the capacity of the bourgeoisie of one nation to exploit the workers and peasants of another nation, to impact the rate and form of capital formation in that nation, to stymie the development of its national bourgeoisie, and to capture for itself large segments of that nation's national market—this constitutes the main substance of national oppression. All of the manifold forms of cultural,

linguistic, and political oppression are rooted in this fundamental economic relationship between oppressor and oppressed nations.

Consequently all theoreticians of the Black Nation thesis have an inescapable task before them. They must, first of all, identify and analyze the distinct common economy of the Black Nation and, secondly, they must analyze the economic relations between the Black Nation and the oppressor White Nation in order to elucidate the economic substance of national oppression.

In this endeavor it is inevitable that the analysis of the plantation system would play a key role. From the time the first African was brought to North America in 1619 through the 1930s and '40s when the Black Nation thesis was formulated, most Black people were trapped in backward forms of labor in the plantation system. In *The Negro Question in the United States*, Allen develops a detailed analysis of the conditions of existence of the Black agricultural laborers and makes a contribution to uncovering the dynamics of the plantation system. Although we will dispute his conclusion that the system was semi-feudal, it is important to note that his analysis is of great value.

However, what is key to the Black Nation line is proof of the existence of a distinct national economy for the Black Nation, and this is precisely where the economic analysis falls apart.

On one hand, Black Nation theorists seem to base their whole argument on the plantation system, which they spend the majority of their time analyzing. However, the plantation system does not meet the thesis' racial criteria of an all-Black Nation—it is multi-racial, with whites the majority of planters and small landowners, and a large part of the agricultural laborers. Consequently, in order to bring their economic analysis into line with the conception of an all-Black Nation, the theorists suddenly switch gears. Haywood informs us:

"... the Negroes, who at the time of their release from chattel bondage comprised an almost undifferentiated peasant mass, had by the beginning of the twentieth century become transformed into a people manifesting *among themselves* the class groupings peculiar to modern capitalist society. . . . The process of class differentiation developing against a background of Jim-Crow oppression, and in conditions of continued majority concentration of Negroes in the Black Belt, thus formed the main objective conditions for their emergence as an oppressed nation."<sup>26</sup> (our emphasis)

In other words, the plantation system is suddenly dropped out of the argument, and the national economy of the Black Belt is said to consist only of Black people, including the Black bourgeoisie, petit bourgeoisie, sharecroppers, and tenants, while excluding the white planters, yeomen farmers, and tenants who made up 49.7% of the Black Belt population. Just as the relationship of the plantation system to the determination of

the Black Belt as the national territory turned out to be largely an illusion, so the relationship of the plantation system to the national economy of the Black Nation is largely a mirage.

Consequently we will critique the view that there was a national economy among Blacks alone in Section A. However since Black Nation theorists tend to switch back and forth between various views in their efforts to demonstrate the existence of a Black Nation, we will address the wholly different proposition that the plantation system, white folks and all, is (or, more properly, was) the national economy of the Black Nation in Section B. By so doing, our main aim is to qualitatively refute the notion that there ever was a distinct Black national economy. In the process we will show that the attempt to construct one leads to distortion of economic reality as well as to major theoretical departures from Marxist political economy. We will also show that both versions of the national economy argument run aground on the central error of the Black Nation thesis—defining the racial oppression of Blacks as national oppression.

After pursuing this main argument in the first two sections, we will briefly address the view that the relations of production of the plantation system were essentially semi-feudal. As regards the debate over the existence of a Black Nation, this argument is secondary, since a national economy may be either semi-feudal or capitalist. However, it is important to address this issue since the “semi-feudal” analysis is the basis for defining the struggle against Black oppression as a bourgeois democratic, anti-feudal task. Section C speaks to this point.

In advancing this economic critique, we do not dispute the particularity of the Southern plantation system or the distinctiveness of the economic position of Black people. Our quarrel is with the characterization of either of these as constituting a Black national economy.

#### A. National Economy Among Blacks Alone?

The Black Nation thesis argues that the abolition of slavery unleashed an unprecedented class differentiation among Black people. This class differentiation, made up of a rising Black bourgeoisie, a free farmer, shopkeeper, and professional petit bourgeoisie, and a developing proletariat, together with the many categories of agricultural laborers, is supposed to have constituted the national economy of the Black Nation that came into being after the betrayal of Reconstruction in 1877. This economy, then, consisted of Black people and their economic interaction alone, and was qualitatively distinct from the white economy.

The argument is certainly consistent with the notion of an all-Black Nation. However we will show that it inexorably forces the Black Nation theorists to flagrantly distort Marxist political economy, substituting bourgeois individualist notions of economy and class for the Marxist

scientific understanding of these concepts. More specifically, our critique will address the following points: (1) the distinction between “common conditions of existence” and a “common national economy”; (2) the distortion of the conception of “class”; (3) the question of the national market; and (4) the distinction between a “potential” economy and an “actual” one.

#### 1. Common Conditions or National Economy

Allen and Haywood do their best work detailing the highly oppressive and exploitative character of the plantation system. In so doing, they establish clearly that Black Southerners suffered a common economic condition that distinguished them as a group from whites. However, identifying the particularity of the Black economic condition is not at all the same as establishing that this condition constituted a separate national economy. The logical leap from the idea that Blacks have a common oppressed economic life to the idea that there is an oppressed Black national economy is based on the confusion of “common conditions of life” with a “common economy.”

In Marxism, a national economy is a systematic set of economic relations encompassing various classes and strata in the course of producing and reproducing the material existence of the nation. Such an economy is all-sided, an integrated system of production, distribution, circulation, and consumption. The surest sign of a distinct economy is the emergence of such “macroeconomic” phenomena as a distinct monetary and credit system (even if the names of the currency may be the same as that of another nation), a distinct general rate of profit and interest, a developing equity market, etc. All nations, even colonial nations, consist of distinct capitalist social formations which exhibit these macroeconomic phenomena despite the often severe constraints imposed by colonialism and imperialism. In fact, it is precisely the more favorable economic conditions for capitalist accumulation in the oppressed nations that attract imperialist capital in the first place.

While Black people have certainly suffered a common economic oppression, nothing like all-sided economic relations between different classes of Black people has ever existed, except as a highly marginal phenomenon. There has never been anything like a distinct monetary or credit system among Blacks, though certainly the U.S. financial system has subjected Black people to discrimination and oppression. And there are virtually no Black industrial enterprises that could give rise to a distinct general rate of profit or interest. In fact, Black oppression has never consisted of Blacks being shunted off into their own economy—to the contrary, the “common economic condition” of Black people has been that of a specially oppressive and exploitative integration into the U.S. on the basis of their color, an integration that was brought about by

force and maintained by violence. It is true that Black people as a group faced different economic conditions than did whites as a group within the plantation system, but this is a far cry from the notion that there were distinct white and Black national economies.

In this case, the essential theoretical error of the thesis is to reduce the notion of an "economy" from a systematic set of economic relations to a collection of individual economic activities and conditions. The "national economy of the Black Nation" is constructed simply by identifying the individual economic activity of all Blacks in the Black Belt and declaring the sum total of these activities and conditions to be a "national economy." By such logic, the "common conditions" of the U.S. proletariat could be called a national economy, or the "common economic fate" of youth or women could be considered a national economy, etc.

## 2. The Black Nation Thesis and Class Differentiation

Given the difficulty of locating anything approximating the phenomena of a national economy, such as a monetary or credit system, the Black Nation thesis argues its case by suggesting that a distinct class differentiation after the Civil War coalesced into a national economy. They cite the emergence of an intellectual and professional stratum, list those Blacks who they think were bourgeois or petit bourgeois, highlight the growth in Black land ownership, and note the development of a growing sector of Black agricultural and industrial proletarians. Arrived at through a study of the census data, these listings are supposed to constitute proof of a Black national economy.

Such an approach has nothing in common with Marxism or Marxist political economy. For all its reference to classes, it is nothing but bourgeois sociology which analyzes classes in terms of occupational categories and income statistics.

What Marxism has established is that classes form *in relation to one another* and are defined by their mutual relationships to the means of production, their respective roles in social production, and the economic forms in which they appropriate their respective shares of the social wealth. Thus, for example, the bourgeoisie is not simply a group of businessmen with a lot of money, nor is the proletariat just a mass of poor folks with lousy jobs. Rather, these two classes are defined by *their specific relation to one another in the production process*. The capitalists own and control the means of production and subsistence while the proletariat owns nothing but its labor-power, as a result of which the bourgeoisie is able to hire the workers and appropriate the product of their labor, making a profit by ensuring that the workers produce more value than they are paid. The Marxist approach to classes is designed to uncover the actual exploitative and oppressive relations

between classes which give rise to the class struggle between them that propels history forward.

By contrast, bourgeois sociology determines classes *in isolation from one another*, by means of income or occupation, and thus obscures the exploitative and oppressive content of the relations between classes in capitalist production.

In this same fashion, the Black Nation thesis searches out the individual economic activity of Blacks by analyzing income and occupational data, groups them into "classes," and declares the whole a "Black national economy." This "class analysis" offered by the Black Nation thesis actually serves only to obscure the real class formation that did take place in this period *between whites and Blacks*: white planters vs. Black agricultural laborers of all kinds, white industrialists vs. Black workers, white homeowners vs. Black domestics, etc.; or among whites themselves: white planters vs. white agricultural laborers, white industrialists vs. white workers, or white farmers in their own right. Very few Blacks worked for other Blacks, and this is still the case today as less than 3% of Black workers worked for Black employers in 1975. Certainly there were and are class distinctions among Black people. There are Black proletarians, Black farmers, Black shopkeepers and professionals, etc. But they do not form in relationship to each other and do not constitute a national economy, not even an oppressed national economy. Rather they arise from the relation between Blacks and whites within the larger Southern and U.S. political economy.

Among other things, this bourgeois sociological approach also leads to the inclusion into the so-called Black economy of many non-Black Belt Blacks. Even the Black Nation theorists are compelled to admit that the class differentiation among Blacks after the Civil War did not take place principally in the Black Belt, the supposed location of the Black national economy. The Black proletariat, bourgeoisie, and petit bourgeoisie developed mainly in the North and urban areas of the South outside of the Black Belt. By the standards of the Black Nation thesis these areas are in the White Nation. Only a few Black landowners, merchants, and wage-laborers can be identified within the Black Belt itself. As Haywood put it:

"... a singular feature of the Negro national question in the United States is that the most advanced and articulate section of the Negro bourgeoisie has developed outside the Black Belt region, and especially in the cities of the North."<sup>27</sup>

Such a telling admission can be made by a leading theoretician of the Black Nation thesis because within its bourgeois sociological framework, the supposed classes of the Black Nation need not function in relation to one another to constitute a national economy.

This view also leads to a gross overestimation of the number, strength,

and power of the Black bourgeoisie, as if it had a hand in actually running a nation. Among those whom Black Nation theorists characterized as the "big capitalists" are Black-owned insurance companies, which actually began as church-initiated mutual aid societies providing health and funeral benefits for their congregations as a slim hedge against the devastation that could occur if even one working member of an already dirt-poor family fell sick or died.

The "Black industrialists" were actually small manufacturers who produced those few consumption items of the Black community that were not identical to those of whites and that were too specialized to attract the interest of white capitalists. The "comprador capitalists" of the Black Nation thesis were supposed to be people like Booker T. Washington who were described as having a "comprador-like posture" towards U.S. imperialism. In actuality Washington was hardly more than a petit bourgeois conduit for government and philanthropic funds and a useful "spokesman of the Black community." To call people like him compradors is to reduce an objective and powerful class to a mere description of one's subjective political attitudes. Real comprador capitalists wield billions of dollars of capital, not to speak of armies and state machines, on behalf of the imperialist system.

### 3. Black National Market?

Recognizing the weaknesses of their arguments, the Black Nation theorists try to buttress their case for an all-Black national economy by focusing on the question of the market, rather than production relations (classes). This way they hope to portray a connection between a Black merchant bourgeoisie and Black consumers, and thereby to explain away the undeveloped character of both the market itself and the Black industrial bourgeoisie as casualties of imperialist penetration of the Black economy. In their view, the Black bourgeoisie would develop fully if only the Black wage-labor force and Black free farmer classes were unleashed by the breakup of the plantation system. To quote PWOC: "Only the spread of Black land ownership and wage labor could generate a base for the Black bourgeoisie."<sup>28</sup>

What this argument misses is that Black people in the Black Belt were already major consumers, not principally in an all-Black market, but in the Southern regional market. Black sharecroppers owned no means of production at all and were generally restricted or forbidden to grow foodstuffs or to produce household items for themselves by the planters. Even the Black landowners bought much of their means of subsistence and production on the market, rather than producing them on their own. Indeed, within the Black Belt it is likely that Blacks accounted for the largest number of consumers since they were the majority of the population and so few of them were engaged in subsistence farming.

What remains of the so-called Black national market after the bulk of Black consumption is thus accounted for is actually nothing more than that portion of Black consumer items that white capitalists refused to cater to: funerals, barbershops, hair straightening preparations, life insurance, beauty salons, community stores, etc. Essentially the argument for the existence of a national market amounts to nothing more than identifying individuals who have managed to accumulate small sums of money and open businesses that meet the consumption and service needs that arise on the basis of a segregated, racist society, calling them the "national bourgeoisie of the Black Nation." The modest market surrounding these activities is then designated the "national market" of the Black Nation. In other words, the segregated ghetto has simply been given a new name: the Black Nation.

Given these realities, it comes as no surprise that the predicted expansion of the Black national market and Black bourgeoisie never materialized, even once the proletariat and free farmer classes became the majority. Instead, these people together with Black sharecroppers, were absorbed into the Southern regional market dominated by the white bourgeoisie.

Thus the argument about a Black national market is nothing but a diversion from the obvious lack of a distinct class formation between Black people in the Black Belt.

### 4. Potential or Actual: A Big Difference

Having exhausted their threadbare arguments for a Black national economy, the Black Nation theorists make their final hedge: the Black economy was "stunted," "retarded," "embryonic," and so forth, to the point of being entirely elusive. Of course, this "now you see it, now you don't" argument is justified by pointing to the terrible impact of imperialism on the newly forming Black Nation.

In essence, the Black Nation theorists assert the *actual* existence of a Black national economy, but end up arguing only for its *potentiality*. Since historical reality refuses to lend support to the actual existence of a Black Nation, they deftly qualify their argument without changing their conclusion.

The PWOC is most blatant in this regard. After summarizing Haywood and Allen's case for a Black Nation, they say that the "economic community of the oppressed nation is necessarily *embyonic and stunted*," that there "was a Black urban petty bourgeoisie in the cities with capitalist *aspirations*" which together with the peasantry had an "objective stake in the *creation* of a national market." Finally they argue that "the virtual disappearance of the Black peasantry and their physical dispersal from the Black Belt spells the end of the *possibility* of developing a national market and thus economic cohesion" in order to

prove their thesis that the Black Nation dissolved in the 1950s.<sup>29</sup> (our emphasis)\*

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\*As noted in the introduction to this article, PWOC has pragmatically constructed what they consider to be an anti-revisionist, anti-dogmatist position by reiterating the Black Nation thesis but then adding that the nation dissolved in the 1950s because of disintegration of the plantation system and migration of many Blacks out of the Black Belt. According to PWOC, Black people presently are an oppressed national minority throughout the U.S.

This line utterly fails to come to grips with any of the theoretical, historical, or ideological errors of the thesis pointed out in this article. In fact, it further compounds the errors.

PWOC clings to the idea that nationalities in the U.S. are racially exclusive, even after they admit that Blacks are fully integrated into the U.S. economy and no longer are part of a distinct nation. Moreover, they distort Lenin's and Stalin's materialist concepts of "assimilation" and "amalgamation" by subtly equating them with their own concept of "dissolution." For Lenin and Stalin, amalgamation refers to the process whereby capitalism welds pre-capitalist ethnic groups and peoples into unified nations and nationalities in the process of primitive accumulation and national formation. For example, amalgamation of the Bretons, Alsacians, et al. into the French nation and nationality. Assimilation refers to the process whereby immigrants and their descendants are integrated into the national life of their adopted nation, and, under these new material circumstances, shed their old nationality and "assimilate" into the new nationality. Neither of these refers to the dissolution of entire nations under capitalism, as PWOC argues.

In fact, in a materialist framework, the dissolution of nations is a process which occurs not under imperialism, but in the transition from the lower stage of communism (socialism) to its higher stage. The basis for dissolution of nations is the development of productive forces that transcend such small geographic/demographic units, and the associated process of abolishing classes, both of which can be accomplished only under the dictatorship of the proletariat.

However, we do not completely discount the possibility of dissolution of a nation under imperialism. But such an eventuality could only be the product of a massive, protracted, and reactionary imperialist scheme such as that which threatens the Palestinian nation today. Certainly, a real nation does not dissolve simply because its economy undergoes a transformation or because substantial numbers of its nationals emigrate, as PWOC argues. Indeed, PWOC adds insult to injury by holding that the supposed Black Nation was the first in human history peacefully, unprotestingly, indeed happily, to dissolve itself under capitalism. Such a historical event would be in stark contrast to the practice of real nations such as Palestine, Puerto Rico, Poland, or Korea, that have fought stubbornly for their national existence and freedom despite repeated annexations, divisions, occupations, colonizations, impositions of foreign languages, etc.

Indeed, there is no difference between PWOC's "dissolution thesis" and Earl Browder's 1944 pronouncement that the Black Nation had exercised its right of self-determination and decided to integrate into the U.S. nation. While both correctly perceived that there is no Black Nation, both establish this op-

But an "embryo" is not the plant itself, only its seed; "aspirations" are hardly the same as actual class interests; and a stake in the "creation" of a national market concedes that the market does not yet exist. Finally, the Black Nation is reduced to a "possibility" that never quite came together.

It is certainly valid to argue for the "potentiality" of a Black Nation, for no nation springs into being wholly formed. In fact, analyzing the potential in the actual is the heart of Marxist analysis, for we are interested in the present not for its own sake, but in order to understand the potential for change, for example, the objective potential for socialism in the actuality of capitalism. However, in the Marxist sense "potential" is not a voluntarist or utopian "desire" but a materialist concept whose objectivity must be proven in each case, and the distinction between potential and actual is understood to be qualitative in character, since for something to exist is not the same as for it potentially to exist. Not all potentialities become realities.

The Black Nation theorists, and especially PWOC, completely obscure this crucial dialectical understanding. They reduce potential to subjective aspirations instead of basing it on an analysis of the objective contradictions in present reality, and they merge the qualitative distinction between potential and actual, reducing the difference to one of quantity instead of quality. It is one thing to argue that there was a potential for a Black Nation—in this case it is not yet a reality. It is quite another to assert that there *is* a Black Nation—in this case it is supposedly a historical fact to be reckoned with and which can be verified empirically. But because the case for an actual Black Nation is so shaky, the theorists inevitably collapse this qualitative distinction. By asserting its actuality but only arguing for its potentiality, they hope not to be held accountable for empirically verifying the Black Nation's existence.

Taking this one step further, some Black Nation theorists forthrightly argue that an oppressed nation need not have a common economy to be a nation.<sup>30</sup> This is quite the opposite of the materialist notion that places the question of the developing national economy as the *centerpiece* of national formation, without which the other features either do not come into being or cannot be considered the features of a nation. This applies to oppressed nations just as much as to oppressor nations, and they have no problem meeting this historical requirement, no matter how oppressed or penetrated by imperialism they may be. To liquidate the

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portunistically by suggesting that the Nation dissolved rather than conducting a thorough critique of the Black Nation thesis.

Finally, PWOC fails to replace the oppressed nation framework with a substantial new theoretical or historical analysis of the nature or material basis of Black oppression.

centrality of a national economy in the forging and development of a nation is to depart from materialism on the national question and retreat back to idealist and culturalist conceptions of nations and nationalities.

In summation, the argument for a Black national economy among Black people alone falls flat because there has never been such a thing. The concern of the Black Nation thesis to analyze the oppression of Black people, in this case, their economic oppression, is laudable. However, true to the Black Nation line, its theorists conceptualize this as the oppression of a Black national economy. Since nothing resembling a distinct system of economic relations, an economy, ever existed among Blacks, the theorists are forced to distort Marxist political economy in order to create one. This is in vain, because the economic dictate of racial oppression has always been to lock Black people into the role of a specially exploitable labor pool *within* the U.S. class structure in order to hasten, facilitate, and shape U.S. capitalist development—not to expel them from that class structure and force them to forge their own economy. The economic arguments of the thesis thus make the double error of distorting the economic reality of Black oppression and departing from Marxist theory in their attempt to identify a non-existent common economy for the Black Nation.

### B. The Plantation System as the “Black National Economy”

We have shown that trying to construct a Black national economy solely from the economic interactions among Black people in the Black Belt leads to a gross distortion of Marxist political economy. The assertion that the plantation system, including both the whites and the Blacks, was a national economy avoids many of those problems and is somewhat more consistent with Marxist theory. Although Haywood, and especially Allen, spend a great deal of energy analyzing the plantation system, in the end—by omission rather than assertion—they retreat from considering it the national economy of the Black Nation. Only the CLP consistently holds this position, though all of the Black Nation theorists refer to it whenever convenient. Nonetheless, despite the theorists’ own vagueness, the argument that the national economy was solely the economic interactions among Blacks and the argument that it consisted of the plantation system are qualitatively different and ultimately mutually exclusive arguments.

Certainly the Southern plantation system was distinct from anything else in the country, regardless of whether one considers it semi-feudal or capitalist. It included a distinctive class polarization between the planters and the various categories of agricultural laborers. And it drew no color line for participation in it. Consequently the argument for the plantation economy as a national economy seems strong, almost commonsensical.

Nonetheless, like the conception of an all-Black national economy, this argument also founders on the shoals of the anti-materialist notion of an all-Black Nation, though from a different angle as we will see. That theoretical determination aside, we will show that the plantation system can in no way be considered a national economy in its own right. At most, the plantation system can be said to have been a regional economy of the South inseparable from the larger national U.S. economy. We will take up these arguments in turn.

The first problem with the view that the plantation economy was the national economy of the Black Nation is that it thoroughly contradicts the view that there is a nation consisting solely of Blacks. Historical materialism understands that sustained life within a single capitalist economic formation is what forges distinct peoples into unified nations and nationalities. Since the plantation economy clearly involved both Blacks and whites in almost equal numbers for more than 300 years, the theorists are hard pressed to conjure up a reason why Southern Blacks and whites are not considered part of the same nation and nationality. The materialist notion that a common history has forged them into a single nationality is anathema to the Black Nation thesis, including the CLP version, because it destroys their basic contention that the *particularity of Black oppression* is that of being an oppressed nation. If there was a multi-racial oppressed Black Belt nation, the particularity of Black oppression would be unaccounted for, and the Black Nation thesis as a solution to the Black question would be thoroughly discredited.

The Black Nation theorists try to dodge this sticky contradiction by asserting that whites are economically part of the Black Nation, but not part of the Black nationality. In this scenario, the Black Nation consists of a majority Black nationality and a white national minority.\* This is explained by analogy to multi-national corporations run by U.S.

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\*The full incongruity of the Black Nation thesis with reality is exposed in the notion of the “White Negro,” “Anglo-American Negro,” “White Black,” or whatever term the various theorists might use to denote the supposed white national minorities in the Black Nation. Such terms are completely consistent with the Black Nation thesis framework, since White, Anglo-American, Negro, and Black are supposed to be names of nations and nationalities, and not racial groups. Thus, were there really distinct White and Black Nations, the idea of a “White Black” would be no more strange than the notion of a “Chinese American,” “Italian American,” etc. However, in social reality, white and Black are racial designations, not national ones, and therefore the notion of a “White Black” is completely incongruent with reality. Like classes, racial groups are mutually exclusive poles of an oppressive social relationship. Consequently, the notion of a “White Black” (or a “Black White”) is as ridiculous as a “proletarian bourgeois.” The notion of a “White Black” may be consistent for the Black Nation thesis, but it is totally out of touch with reality.

personnel in underdeveloped countries or white settlers in African countries.

Such analogies do not pass muster. Whites in the plantation economy were never settlers or temporary employees in some pre-existing all-Black colony or oppressed nation. It was the whites themselves who expelled the native peoples from the land, founded the plantation system in the seventeenth century, and eventually imported African slaves to provide the labor that fueled the system after indentured servitude and enslavement of the native peoples failed. Blacks and whites lived and worked in the plantation system for more than 300 years. Thus the analogy of white settlers or temporary U.S. personnel in a foreign land is without foundation. The thesis separates whites and Blacks into distinct nationalities on the basis of color only, thereby violating the most basic principles of historical materialism and reproducing the racist view that Blacks and whites are inherently, biologically different peoples.

In short, the idea that the plantation economy was the national economy of the Black Nation is inconsistent with the conclusion that there was a separate all-Black Nation or nationality. In fact, a fully consistent application of the plantation economy as national economy framework would considerably expand the borders of the national territory to include the greater part of the South, altering the racial composition of this nation to the point where the idea of Black self-determination would become an untenable proposition or a cruel joke. Actually a multi-racial Southern nation and nationality, not an all-Black Nation or nationality, is the more logical conclusion of deeming the plantation system a national economy in its own right. It is this dilemma that causes most of the Black Nation theorists to recoil from pronouncing the plantation system the Black national economy and to resort to an all-Black view of the economy. But let us for the moment set this contradiction aside and address on its own merit the question: Was the plantation economy a national economy (of whatever nation) in its own right? In our view, it was not. The plantation system was a distinct regional economy within the overall U.S. national economy and not a distinct national economy.

The basis for distinct regional economies are diverse. Included are backward regions that have not yet come under the full sway of capital, regions with geographical peculiarities that give rise to economic peculiarities, and regions whose economies are concentrated in a particular sphere of production. Production and market relations may reflect wide regional variation while remaining part of an integral, national whole. All capitalist economies develop unevenly, so it is not unusual to find regionally distinct economies within them. The real question, then, is the nature and extent of the integration of the regional economy into the national economy over time.

The Black Nation thesis makes no attempt to grapple with this problem, and merely asserts that the plantation system was a national economy after 1880. History does not bear out this conclusion.

Uneven development in the U.S. was quite pronounced due to its colonial origins and its settler-nation expansionist history. Some parts of the U.S. remained more or less unintegrated until the last half of the nineteenth century. Within this, the South was undoubtedly the most dramatically distinct regional economy. It is even possible that in the period prior to the American Revolution, the North, led by the merchants, and the South, led by the slaveholders, might have started to develop into distinct nations with their own national economies. However, this historical possibility was basically foreclosed by the American Revolution and its immediate aftermath. With the adoption of the Constitution, the merchants and slaveholders consciously decided against a federationist state and for a centralized republic that would take up the business of forging a new nation into an ever tighter unity.

From the revolution on, then, the trend was toward greater national economic cohesion rather than national separation; even the aggravated conflict between North and South was a reflection of this growing cohesion. Indeed, the economic history of the U.S. is entirely incomprehensible without understanding the centrality of the plantation system, slave labor, and the slave trade to the early formation and expansion of the national capital as a whole. This was expressed in the relationship between the development of plantation cotton and the growth of the textile and machine-building industries in the early nineteenth century; the growth of a vast and complex transportation, communications, and credit system linking the merchants, bankers, and suppliers of the North with the plantation system; and the ongoing struggles over the tariff, economic and political policy in the West, etc. These were so many episodes in the struggle to cement the various regional economies into a unified national economy and market led by a unified bourgeoisie able to act on its general class interests without committing class fratricide over its many particular interests. Whereas until 1776 it was an open question whether the future would be unified national development or distinct federated development of different nations, by 1861 the slaveholders had to declare war on the Union in a belated attempt to reverse 84 years of common national political and economic history. That attempt was in vain, and the result was not the formation of a distinct Black Belt or Southern nation, but precisely the forcible denial of the right of the South, or any other part of the U.S., to stake out any substantial independence from the national dictates of industrial capital. The economic cohesion of the U.S. was thus brought to a new level under the leadership of industrial capital, even though regionally distinct economies continued until the plantation system was destroyed in the 1950s.

In short, the plantation system, both before and after slavery, played a crucial rôle in the internal development of the U.S. national economy and class formation. To identify that system as a distinct national economy does violence to the actual contradictions that shaped U.S. history.

### C. Was the Plantation System Semi-Slave/Semi-Feudal?

We have already disputed both versions of the thesis' argument for a distinct national economy for the Black Nation, the linchpin of their economic analysis. Lacking a national economy it becomes completely idealist to identify a social group as a nation. Consequently the Black Nation thesis is qualitatively undermined to the degree that we have proven our point.

In this section, we turn to a different question: the economic character of the plantation system. All of the Black Nation theorists (except the CLP) advance the idea that the post-Civil War plantation system was semi-slave/semi-feudal in character. Through all of the massive changes in Southern agriculture in the 1930s and 1940s, the theorists continue to find slave remnants and semi-feudal conditions prevailing in the Black Belt. This view is a helpful prop to the argument for a national economy insofar as it highlights the supposed qualitative distinction between the "capitalist North" and the "pre-capitalist South" or promotes the analogy of the Black Nation as a "semi-colony." But, as we noted earlier, a distinct national economy need not be semi-feudal to exist, so this argument is not central to the "common economy" controversy. It is, however, an economic foundation for the view that both the Civil War/Reconstruction period and the present-day struggle against Black oppression should be viewed as a bourgeois democratic revolution against pre-capitalist planters and their semi-feudal plantation system. In this sense, the category "semi-feudal" has considerable political significance.

Let us note at the outset that we have no quarrel with using the term "semi-slave" to describe certain phenomena of the plantation system. In fact, it aptly highlights the coercive aspects of the system, especially sharecropping, the oppressive condition of the mass of Black labor, and the qualitative difference in the conditions of Blacks as compared to whites. To the degree that terms like "semi-slave," or "remnants of slavery" draw attention to these phenomena, they are quite useful.

However the thesis attempts to elevate terms like "semi-slave" and "remnants of slavery" to basic theoretical categories of economic analysis, rather than limiting them to descriptive terms. Specifically, James Allen considers the "economic survivals of slavery" to be the central feature of sharecropping, and all of the theorists use this term to suggest that changes in the plantation system after the Civil War were

only formal and quantitative in relation to slavery. The failure to grasp the qualitative change ushered in by the Civil War and the tendency to gaze backward toward slavery blinded the theorists to the ongoing trends of change in the plantation system that were undermining it altogether. As a result, the thesis stuck to its position through the 1950s that capitalism could never decisively break up the plantation system, that the Black migration northward was a once-only occurrence during WWI that had already been reversed and could never be repeated, and that Southern industry, rather than undermining the plantation system, was based on it.\*

The characterization of the plantation system as semi-feudal is even more broadly applied by the thesis to define the nature of that system's mode of production. This analysis is, in our view, erroneous and misleading.

The concept "semi-feudal" refers to a definite set of socio-economic relations. Specifically it refers to a social formation which is based on feudal relations of production, but which is being enveloped in, penetrated by, disintegrated and transformed by capitalist relations of production. In the process, the form is preserved of some previously feudal relations even as their economic content is being transformed, other feudal relations remain relatively untouched by capital, and some entirely new capitalist relations are introduced.

For example there might be a situation in which some peasants continue to be obliged to pay rent-in-kind to a feudal landlord while simultaneously being drawn into a money economy, perhaps through having to pay taxes to the state in money-form; at the same time a new class of capitalist farmers and capitalist landlords (those who make profit by renting their land to capitalist farmers) may be coming into being while other parts of the country remain solidly feudal. Under these circumstances, new capitalist economic personalities and classes emerge while the feudal peasant and landlord are being transformed, either gradually or abruptly, into agricultural wage-laborers, independent farmers, capitalist farmers, capitalist landlords, or immigrants to the cities or to other countries. In any case, the main dynamic here is the break-up of the self-sufficient feudal economy and the emergence of capitalist relations. A semi-feudal economy, then, refers to a society enmeshed in this process of transition, which process will be more or less extended depending primarily on the vigor and power of the penetration of capitalism.

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\*See Harry Haywood's defense of the Black Nation line, *For a Revolutionary Position on the Negro Question*, originally written in 1957 in the midst of the line struggle that eventually led to the CPUSA dropping the line, and reprinted by the October League (M-L), 1975.

It is true that many features of the plantation system bore some resemblance to feudalism. The landlord/sharecropper relationship based on the exploitation of labor through a system of rent-in-kind, the various gradations of agricultural tenancy and their great preponderance over wage labor, and the primacy of agriculture over industry all seem to indicate the pre-capitalist nature of the economic relations. But, in our view, these are only surface similarities to feudalism that mask the essentially capitalist relations of production of the plantation system, and the planter/sharecropper relation in particular.

What is the basis for this determination? In a rare attempt to synthesize the essential features of capitalism, Marx said:

*“Capitalist production is distinguished from the outset by two characteristic features. First, It produces its products as commodities. The fact that it produces commodities does not differentiate it from other modes of production; but rather the fact that being a commodity is the dominant and determinant characteristic of its products. This implies, first and foremost, that the laborer himself comes forward merely as a seller of commodities, and thus as a free wage-labourer, so that labour appears in general as wage-labour. . . . The second distinctive feature of the capitalist mode of production is the production of surplus-value as the direct aim and determining motive of production. Capital produces essentially capital, and does so only to the extent that it produces surplus-value.”*<sup>31</sup> (our emphasis)

No one, not even the Black Nation theorists, disputes that the *raison d'être* of sharecropping was the profit gained by producing cotton as a commodity for the world market. It is futile to argue that this system was somehow self-contained or self-sufficient in the manner of feudalism. Indeed, the fact that it overwhelmingly produced just one commodity is unthinkable outside of a highly developed market economy based on a developed social division of labor between agriculture and industry that functioned regionally, nationally and internationally. The political economy of the post-Civil War South did not exhibit the “stationary social conditions” characteristic of feudalism. It was definitely based on generalized commodity production and surplus-value (profit) as the direct aim and determining motive of production, the two key features of capitalism identified by Marx.

Things are more sticky when it comes to Marx's discussion of wage-labor. However, we believe that it is more accurate to characterize the planter/sharecropper relation as a backward form of wage-labor and not as a semi-feudal relation.

The planter owned all of the means of production—land, seed, fertilizer, implements—and entered into contractual sharecropping agreements to obtain labor power from which to extract surplus value. This is the classical position of the capitalist class, although some capitalists do not own their land but rent it from another capitalist

landlord. The feudal landlord, by contrast, rarely if ever owned the implements of production. Although in late feudalism they often sold goods on the market as commodities, they did not extract surplus-value from hired laborers, but rather exploited rent from peasants on the basis of their monopoly over land as their main source of income.

The sharecroppers, on the other hand, were divorced entirely from the means of production and therefore forced to enter sharecropping agreements in order to survive. According to these agreements, the sharecroppers sold their labor-power for one-half of their annual product, but had no control over what they would produce, were subjected to strict labor supervision, and had no right to dispose of any of the product until after the planter received his half and all debts were cleared. Because the planter also controlled the means of subsistence—food, clothing, housing, etc.—which he loaned to the sharecropper at exorbitant interest, the planter was able to extract far more than the one-half of the crop due him by the original sharecropping agreement, thus keeping the sharecropper perpetually in debt. However, it is untrue that this debt kept the sharecroppers bound to the land in the manner of feudal serfs. Most recent econometric studies refute this myth, and estimate the average length of time spent on any one plantation by a Black family to have been about six years, hardly the generation after generation land tenure of feudalism.\* The fact that sharecropping agreements were entered into for only one year, combined with the fact of constant movement from plantation to plantation, indicates the existence of a market in labor-power within the plantation system. In sum, the sharecropper was in the classical propertyless position characteristic of the proletariat, not that of a feudal peasant who was bound to the land and who owned agricultural implements.

Thus the planter/sharecropping relationship was a capitalist, not semi-feudal relationship. The planter was principally an agricultural capitalist who extracted surplus-value from the proletariat sharecroppers in the course of commercial cotton production.

The Black Nation theorists mistakenly consider the planter/sharecropper relationship to be feudal because they misunderstand the Marxist notion of “wage-labor.” Their perspective seems to be that all those who get paid in the form of wages are “wage-laborers,” a criteria which obviously excludes sharecroppers from this category. This view

\*See, for example, Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), and Jay Mandle, *The Roots of Black Poverty*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978). While the restrictions on movement within the plantation system were real but not prohibitive, restrictions on movement out of the plantation system altogether were prohibitive.

confuses wages as a form of payment with wage-labor as the content of a definite production (class) relation of capitalism.

Wage-labor in the Marxist sense refers to that production relationship in which one social grouping, the proletariat, is stripped of all means of production and subsistence and is therefore forced to enter into relationship with another social group that owns the means of production (the capitalists) by selling their labor-power at a value far lower than the value they will produce for the capitalist in the process of production. Looked at from one side, this relationship is called "capital." Looked at from the other side, it is called "wage-labor." Translated into class terms, "wage-labor" refers to the working class, while "capital" refers to the other side of the same production relationship, the capitalist class. The proletarian condition is that of propertylessness. The proletarian function is that of producing and realizing surplus-value for capital.

Wage-labor, in this sense, gets paid in many forms, not necessarily in hourly or monthly "wages" alone. Many workers get paid by piecework, others by commission, and today the capitalists are intent on increasing productivity and gaining the loyalty of "their workers" by paying them in the form of "profit-sharing." Most workers receive at least part of their pay in the form of health and other fringe benefits, pension contributions, etc. On the other hand, many non-wage laborers, even capitalists, get paid in the form of "wages"; everyone from corporate managers to engineers, tenured college professors to the president of the United States receive "wages." ("Salary" is merely a higher status word for the same thing.) Our point is that wages as a form of payment and wage-labor as a class or production relation category are not at all the same.

As we analyzed above, the sharecropper was definitely proletarian, by condition as well as by function. Rent-in-kind (or sharecropping) was merely the peculiar form of payment that existed in this essentially wage-labor relationship between planter capitalist and agricultural worker. Sharecropping originated because of the lack of currency in the South after the Civil War (during which the Confederacy had refused to honor the "Yankee dollar" and instituted its own currency) and because of the refusal of the former slaves to participate in labor gangs that the planters tried to carry over from slavery, even though this was on a wage rather than slave basis. The content of sharecropping, from the very beginning, was nothing but a disguised form of extraction of surplus-value from the sharecropper in the form of cotton and payment for wage-labor in the same form. The Black Nation theorists, in confusing sharecropping with semi-feudal labor, have mistaken wage-labor as a relationship with wage-labor as a form of payment. Eventually, Haywood was forced to recognize this error, even though he never surrendered the semi-feudal line:

"Actually, sharecroppers are tenants only in form. In reality, they are laborers paid with a share of the crop, lacking the legal rights of the

modern tenant and the wage-laborer's right to collect a cash wage and spend it on the open market."<sup>32</sup>

In sum, the semi-feudal/semi-slave formulation, when used as a definite economic category, obscures more than it clarifies about the plantation system.\* While it may be convenient for the Black Nation thesis, it misses the essentially capitalist relations of production of the plantation system with the negative effect of attributing Black oppression not to capitalism, but to pre-capitalist relations, and the solution to that oppression as bourgeois democratic rather than socialist.

## VI. History According to the Black Nation Thesis

A particular historical analysis of the Civil War and Reconstruction is key to the Black Nation thesis.\*\* According to the Black Nation thesis, the Civil War and its aftermath, Reconstruction, together were a second American Revolution, a bourgeois democratic revolution that pitted the Northern bourgeoisie against the pre-capitalist Southern planters in mortal combat. The successful prosecution of this revolution required not only the abolition of slavery, but also the confiscation of the

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\*In our view U.S. slavery was also capitalist and, contrary to the Black Nation thesis, had almost nothing in common with either feudalism or the ancient slave mode of production. From its seventeenth century origins, its *raison d'être*, as with sharecropping, was the production of commodities for the world market and the production of surplus-value for the slaveholders, the two key features of capitalism noted by Marx.

Normally capitalist production involves wage-labor. However, the peculiarity of the concrete historical circumstances of the origin of the plantation system gave rise to the anomaly of slavery as the labor form utilized by this capitalist agricultural system. The scarcity of labor combined with the ready availability of land forced the planter capitalists to resort to forced labor to secure a stable, exploitable mass of workers. After indentured servitude and the attempted enslavement of the native peoples failed, Black slavery became the solution to this contradiction for the capitalists. Slavery was instituted, not to serve the personal consumption desires of the slaveholders, but to carry out the proletarian function of producing surplus-value in the form of commodities to be sold on the world market.

On the other hand, contrary to the proletarian condition, the slaves were part of the means of production, not separated from them. They themselves were commodities; they did not own their labor power to sell, but were themselves sold. Thus, in our opinion, the slaves were the labor counterpart to capital as the producers of surplus-value, though they cannot be considered wage-laborers. Capitalist slavery seems the most appropriate terminology to capture this situation. A more extended discussion of this complex topic is necessary, but would take us too far afield here.

\*\*See footnote on next page.

plantations and their redistribution to the newly enfranchised Blacks and poor whites. However, the Northern bourgeoisie "betrayed" its own revolution by refusing to take this measure, forming an alliance with the planters instead. The power of the planter class and the oppression of Blacks within the semi-feudal plantation system were thereby ensured, and once again Black people were excluded from democratic integration into the U.S. nation.

This version of the Civil War is given as the principal historical explanation for the rise of an oppressed Black Nation: the bourgeoisie's betrayal of its own bourgeois democratic revolution resulted in the exclusion of Blacks from democratic integration into the U.S. nationality thereby setting the conditions for the formation of a separate Black nationality.

Our critique will not attempt to refute this historical analysis point by point, nor will we try to advance an all-sided alternative view. But we will show that this analysis is qualitatively flawed by idealism and that it completely misses the essence of the class character of the course of U.S. historical development. These errors are a direct result of rewriting history to suit the conclusion that a Black Nation was forged in the post-Reconstruction period. Our historical critique is divided into three parts: A. Distortions of U.S. history; B. Sanitizing the Class Interests of the Bourgeoisie; and C. Idealism and the "Incomplete Bourgeois Democratic Revolution."

#### A. Distortions of U.S. History

As elaborated earlier, our view is that slavery as well as sharecropping were capitalist, not semi-feudal in character. What, then, was the class content of the Civil War and Reconstruction?

In our opinion, the Civil War/Reconstruction period was principally a class struggle between the Northern *industrial* bourgeoisie and the Southern slaveholding bourgeoisie for political supremacy in the U.S. nation. Prior to the maturation of industrial capital in the U.S., which began about 1820, slavery was a key motive force for capitalist development, the principal source of domestically produced surplus-value, a key link in the financial and mercantile circuits of Northern capital, and a force for westward expansion.

But as primitive accumulation of capital gave way to expanded

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\*\*This analysis appears in the works of Allen, Haywood, and PWOc cited earlier. But it was most fully elaborated by James Allen in his *Reconstruction: The Battle for Democracy 1865-1876* (New York: International Publishers, 1970). This book was written right after his *Negro Question in the U.S.* and originally published in 1937. It fleshes out the historical context of the emergence of the Black Nation even though, curiously, it never refers directly to it. It is also a valuable historical analysis in its own right.

accumulation on the basis of modern industry, slavery became a hindrance to further capitalist development, and the class interests of the slaveholders and the industrialists came into antagonistic conflict. With some \$3 billion of capital tied up in slaves, which had by 1840 become relatively unproductive, the slaveholders could see the waning of their political power and ultimately their class extinction if industrial capital were permitted to extend its reign as the country grew.

Increasingly the slaveholders came to oppose the building of the vast East-West economic infrastructures—harbors, roads, canals, and especially the railroads—which clearly would enhance the wealth and power of industrial capital while offering little of value to capital bound to coerced, labor-intensive agricultural production. While industrial capital wanted to strengthen and further centralize the national state power in order to forge the still tenuous national market, slave capital\* saw its interests being protected through the state governments over which it exercised complete control. Industrial capital was determined to develop the national economy on the basis of free labor as the form most suitable for its enterprise; as a result, it insisted that slavery could not be permitted in the new states being brought into the union out of the western expansion and acquisitions. Slave capital, on the other hand, saw the value of its holdings diminishing once such limitations were placed on its own expansion into new territories; it also saw the erosion of its political power unless slavery were extended.

Industrial capital required high protective tariffs to protect its manufactures from the competition of English capital and commodities. Slave capital opposed protective tariffs, seeing in them only higher prices for the goods and supplies it required on the slave plantation.

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\*Throughout this essay we have used the terms "industrial capital" and "slave capital" to characterize the two contending classes in the Civil War at a higher level of abstraction. A word of explanation is in order. The Black Nation thesis usually describes the slaveowners as a "planter class," a term which is consistent with its view that this class survived the Civil War together with a barely altered pre-capitalist economic system. But such a characterization does not at all capture the particularity of this class which was an important owner of capital. This capital was principally in the form of land *and* labor. The latter, slave capital, was especially important and was what gave this class its distinctive character. For it was slave capital which (a) produced the surplus-value off of which this class lived and reproduced itself; (b) could expand itself, through slave-breeding; (c) could more easily be converted into more liquid forms of capital; and (d) could be transported elsewhere for maximum return. In addition, the term "slave capital" helps us to distinguish between the class relations in the South before and after the Civil War. For these reasons, we believe that the term "slave capital" more precisely captures the nature of the Southern slaveowning class.

In addition, the financing of slavery and trade in cotton was an important foothold of English capital in the U.S. economy which, until the Civil War, Marx and Engels still considered an economic vassal of England. In these and other ways, industrial capital and slave capital were at odds.

The principal site of the class struggle was in national politics, most concentrated in the presidential elections and the struggle over the settlement and admission of new states to the union. From the Missouri Compromise in 1820 until the South's attempted secession, slavery was the most explosive issue in the country. The industrial bourgeoisie might well have been content to allow the continuation of slavery for some time, if only it could peacefully subordinate the recalcitrant slaveholders. However the militant "Slave Power" was unwilling to submit to a slow class suicide, and took to arms to defend its class interests.

The essence of the Civil War and Reconstruction was that industrial capital won undisputed political supremacy by abolishing slave capital and subordinating the Southern capitalists and Northern merchants to its dictates. The Civil War/Reconstruction was the U.S. equivalent, not to the French Revolution or English Civil War as the Black Nation thesis claims, but to the class battles waged and won by industrial capital in England in the 1830s (the English Reform Acts) and France in the 1870s (including the overthrow of the Paris Commune). In all advanced capitalist countries the supremacy of industrial capital was won only through conspicuous class struggles with other entrenched class forces: In England principally with the capitalist landlords and merchants who had ruled since the Glorious Revolution of 1688; and in France with the bankers and merchants as well as the rising proletariat. The particularity of the U.S. was the hegemony of slave capital over a large, contiguous region of the country. So here the struggle broke out in armed, regional Civil War. The bourgeois revolution had been won in the American Revolution. The Civil War signaled the rule of industrial capital.

There was a revolutionary democratic aspect to the Civil War and Reconstruction—the struggle to break-up the plantation system and provide land to the tillers, especially ex-slaves. However, in our view this was a demand of the revolutionary petit bourgeoisie—independent farmers, ex-slaves, artisans, etc.—and in no way essential to the program of industrial capital. It was therefore a secondary aspect of the Civil War and Reconstruction that could only have been won through the action of the petit bourgeoisie together with the working class. These classes were too historically undeveloped to challenge industrial capital at the height of its power, so the fate of the ex-slaves to remain a semi-free labor counterpart of a new form of planter capital (no longer slave capital) was sealed. Once this planter class was thoroughly subordinated to industrial capital, the perpetuation of the plantation system in no way obstructed the interests of industrial capital.

When the Black Nation theorists argue that the bourgeoisie betrayed its own interests after the Civil War, they reveal only their own failure to grasp the true nature of capital. What does the bourgeoisie want? It wants to expand its capital. It wants to maximize its appropriation of surplus-value. It wants to defend private property. It wants to secure and constantly reinforce its own class rule, the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Those are the class interests of capital. Everything it does is designed to serve those interests.

Did racial slavery under the conditions prevailing in the U.S. at the time of the bourgeois revolution serve *these* interests of capital? Clearly it did. If racial slavery interfered with these interests would not the bourgeoisie have conducted a struggle to eliminate it? Did granting land and equal political rights to the ex-slaves after the Civil War serve *these* interests of capital? In fact, by perpetuating the plantation system, U.S. capital was able to remain the world leader in production of that most valuable commodity, cotton; it effectively took the wind out of the sails of the small farmers; it kept the laboring masses of the South thoroughly subjected to capital; and it created a massive, latent reserve army of labor whose true value became apparent only when industrial production picked up and immigration was cut off decades later under the stimulus of World War I.

Our first criticism, then, is that the Black Nation thesis completely misidentifies the stage of development of U.S. capitalism and the nature of the class struggle at the time of the Civil War and Reconstruction. As a result, the historical moment when the triumph of industrial capital unified and integrated the U.S. national economy at a higher level than ever before is mistakenly interpreted by the Black Nation thesis as a moment of national disintegration that gave rise to the formation of an "oppressed nation within a nation."

This flawed vision of U.S. history is further revealed by the fact that the thesis ignores more than 250 years of Black oppression. The thesis abdicates responsibility to explain the origin of Black oppression or its nature for all those years, and the Black Nation is portrayed as rising in record time between 1876 and 1900. But as a study of the unaccounted for centuries would show, the supposed "pre-capitalist" slavery was actually a driving force of capitalist development and the oppression of Blacks was racially, not nationally, determined. Why "pre-capitalist slaveholders" played a leading role in the bourgeois independence struggle, penned the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, and occupied the presidency through the nation's crucial early years are also questions which the Black Nation thesis assiduously avoids. Black people were forged into a distinct people not by the formation of a Black Nation in the late nineteenth century, but rather by the common experience of racial slavery and racial oppression. A truly all-sided theory of Black oppression, unlike the Black Nation thesis,

would have to be able to encompass and explain these epoch-making events within its framework.

### B. Sanitizing the Class Interests of the Bourgeoisie

To make their case, the Black Nation theorists fall back on a subjectivist/voluntarist version of history that removes class interest from the historical stage.

The rapacious U.S. bourgeoisie created a model bourgeois republican state after winning independence from England; expanded its rule across an entire continent by murdering native peoples, ripping off Mexico, and intimidating the Spanish, French, Russian, and English bourgeoisies into submission; founded its economy and class rule on stolen land and slavery; and emerged as the number one economic power in the world by the early twentieth century. According to the Black Nation thesis, this calculating and aggressive bourgeoisie haplessly "betrayed its historic class aims" at the two most critical political junctures in U.S. history, the American Revolution and Civil War/Reconstruction. The development of capitalism in the U.S. is thereby reduced to pure luck or elevated to an inexorable "Destiny" undeterred by a bumbling, unconscious bourgeoisie that backed its way into world supremacy.

In the era of the American Revolution, PWOC tells us, the Northern bourgeoisie "expected slavery to die out within a generation. This mistaken estimate, along with the fear of the popular masses and the consequent need for a firm alliance with the planters, were the compelling reasons why the bourgeoisie was to allow the maintenance of slavery *in contradiction to its historic class aims.*"<sup>33</sup> (our emphasis)

According to PWOC, Allen, and Haywood, the bourgeoisie failed to learn from this mistake and made the same grievous error during Civil War and Reconstruction by failing to smash the plantation system and distribute land to the masses. PWOC explains:

"It would be wrong to see this failure as an inevitability, a necessary pattern of political behavior that conformed with the class interests of the bourgeoisie. . . . For the logic of capitalist development would have been far better served by the breaking up of the plantations and the purging of the South's feudal and slave remnants."<sup>34</sup>

In short, the Black Nation theorists argue that slavery was *always* antithetical to the interests of the bourgeoisie and capitalist development, and that the interests of the ex-slaves in securing land and equality also coincided with the benevolent class interests of the bourgeoisie. This prize-winning apology for the bourgeoisie absolves capital from any responsibility for Black oppression. According to the Black Nation thesis, Black oppression is rooted in pre-capitalist backwardness, not in "bourgeois democratic capitalism," and the bourgeoisie itself was secretly the lapsed champion of Black liberation!

What caused this unfortunate "lapse" that foiled the class interests of the bourgeoisie and condemned Black people to continued semi-feudal oppression? Adding insult to injury, the thesis makes another foray into populist/revisionist history and blames this lapse on an advancing revolutionary proletariat. Caught between two evils and in the midst of great confusion, the hapless bourgeoisie mistakenly decided to contradict its class interests by making peace with the planters rather than succumb to the power of a worker-farmer alliance. To quote PWOC:

"It is in the political situation that we must look for an explanation of this failure [to confiscate the plantations]. . . .

"Following the war, the gross corruption and profiteering along with intensified exploitation had engendered a mood of revolt among the broad masses of workers and farmers. . . .

"In searching for a new formula for stability and class peace, the bourgeoisie came to align itself once more with the planters and the new class of rising capitalists in the South."<sup>35</sup>

If only the unruly workers had stayed in line, racism would have been obliterated from history by the U.S. bourgeoisie more than 100 years ago!

Such is the ludicrous combination of voluntarism, populism—and racism—which the Black Nation theorists are compelled to concoct in the service of their line.

### C. Idealism and the "Incomplete Bourgeois Democratic Revolution"

The key historical argument of the Black Nation thesis is that the bourgeoisie's "betrayal" of the bourgeois democratic revolution meant that Black people were not democratically incorporated into the U.S. nation. Blacks were therefore obliged to forge their own nation. According to this view, those people not granted equality are not part of a nation, and the bourgeois revolution remains incomplete until equality is extended to everyone. Paraphrasing Haywood, PWOC writes:

"The formation of national states and the amalgamation of peoples on the basis of equality was a feature of the bourgeois democratic revolution in Europe. This achievement . . . fully corresponded to the bourgeoisie's class interests in the period of progressive capitalism, and as such constituted a generalized task of the bourgeois revolution. But in the U.S. . . . the revolution left chattel slavery intact and thus excluded Black people and deformed the subsequent democratic development of the nation. . . . Just as the French Revolution had amalgamated Bretons, Normans and Alsatians into a single national union, so did the U.S. Revolution weld together the various white European peoples of the English North American colonies. This was

achieved on the firm ground of the establishment of full political and social equality. Not only were Black people denied equality, but the overwhelming majority of them were maintained in slavery, which meant they existed outside the normal political, social and economic development of the nation as a whole."<sup>36</sup>

This line of reasoning is both historically inaccurate and a thoroughly idealist concession to bourgeois mythology.

Historical materialists recognize the progressive character of the bourgeoisie's rise to power and the fact that in pursuit of its class aims the bourgeoisie sometimes extends bourgeois democracy and equality to wide sections of the population. But to assert that the bourgeois revolution amalgamated people "on the firm ground of the establishment of full political and social equality" is to buy into a cherished bourgeois myth.

National formation does indeed proceed based on the amalgamation of tribes, peoples, ethnic groups, and regions. The development of a single unified national economy, state, territory, language, and culture depends on the subordination or elimination of distinctions between groups and regions. The driving force of this process is the primitive accumulation of capital, hardly known for its peaceful means or its respect for equality. In the political sphere, for example, inequalities are evident in the imposition of property qualifications on the right to suffrage and the exclusion of women from this right well into the twentieth century, even in the most advanced bourgeois democracies. In the social/cultural sphere the establishment of a single language as the national language necessarily meant the subordination and usually the suppression of the languages, and thus the cultures, of other peoples. And economically the bourgeoisie of the most advanced regions actively works to break up distinctive regional economies, political structures, languages, and cultures in order to unite the national economy and create a nation-state.

All this "was accomplished with merciless Vandalism, and under the stimulus of passions of the most infamous, the most sordid, the pettiest, the most meanly odious."<sup>37</sup> The process of capitalist national formation has nothing in common with the idyllic "amalgamation. . . on the basis of equality" which the Black Nation thesis is obliged to project.

In line with this bourgeois idealism, the Black Nation thesis has also invented new criteria for how a nationality is determined. Those who are extended full bourgeois democratic rights are part of the nation. Those unfortunates who are barred from such rights are not. Haywood writes:

"Here again [during Civil War and Reconstruction], for the second time, hope was held for the full integration of the Negro into American life as a free and equal citizen, for the consolidation of Americans, black and white, into one nation. But again the revolution was aborted,

again the Negro was left outside the portals of full citizenship. . . . This second great defeat blasted his hopes for democratic absorption into American national life. . . .

"The rise of a finance-capitalist oligarchy to dominant position in American economic and political life precluded the possibility of peaceful democratic fusion of the Negro into a single American nation along with whites. Thenceforth the issue of Negro equality could be solved only via the path of the Negro's full development as a nation."<sup>38</sup>

This is nothing but bourgeois legal logic posing as Marxism-Leninism. True, Black people were not absorbed into U.S. national life in a "peaceful democratic" fashion. Their absorption was most undemocratic, anything but peaceful and mediated through the establishment of oppressive racist relations. But "absorbed" they were, as is indicated by the cultural and linguistic transformation they experienced in this country. A nation is an objective entity determined principally by the production relationships among people, not by citizenship laws or constitutional rights. By this materialist criteria, Black people have always been at the center of U.S. nation-building. But the Black Nation thesis by its subjective bourgeois logic joins the bourgeoisie and all other racists in attempting to deprive Black people of their bitterly contested historical right to the product of their labor as embodied in the wealth and productive power of the U.S. nation. Instead Blacks are shunted off into what amounts to a backwards Black Belt bantustan.

If we were to accept the bourgeois legal logic of the Black Nation thesis, we would have to conclude that women were not part of the U.S. nation (or any other, for that matter) until they won the right to vote in the twentieth century; the proletariat and the propertyless peasantry were not part of those nations, including the U.S. and most of Europe, that denied non-property holders the right to vote until well into the nineteenth century; etc.

The root of these errors lies in the mistaken understanding of what a bourgeois revolution is, and when it is qualitatively completed. The central question of the bourgeois revolution is the seizure of state power by the bourgeoisie. This seals its economic and political triumph over feudalism and enables the capitalists to "employ the power of the State, the concentrated and organised force of society, to hasten, hothouse fashion, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode. . . ."<sup>39</sup>

In the U.S., the question of which class would hold state power was qualitatively settled by the American Revolution of 1776 and the Constitution of 1787. The developing national bourgeoisie, mainly merchants and slaveholders, united with the petit-bourgeoisie, mainly independent landowners and artisans, to kick out the English and forge a bourgeois nation-state. The Constitution together with the Bill of Rights

sanctioned slavery, but this was hardly an inconsistency given the central role of slavery for the primitive accumulation of capital in the U.S. The Constitution represented the consolidation and codification of the united rule of this developing national bourgeoisie.

By contrast, the Black Nation thesis' view, that the bourgeois democratic revolution is incomplete and deformed until all sectors of the population enjoy full democratic rights, quantifies the concept of the bourgeois democratic revolution. The winning of each new right becomes another step in the completion of this never-ending "revolution." This is the logic of revisionists and social democrats who replace the need for revolutionary action to smash the bourgeois state and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat with a laundry list of bourgeois democratic reforms to be peacefully won, the sum total of which adds up to "revolution" and "socialism." The distinction between "completing the bourgeois democratic revolution" and "socialism" is either quantitative or altogether nonexistent.

The Black Nation theorists stress the democratic side of the bourgeois revolution and drop out the essence of the question—the bourgeois dictatorship over the laboring masses. Fully consistent democracy is impossible under capitalism, as bourgeois rule places qualitative restrictions on the form and content of democracy and equality. For the most part, the extension of democratic rights occurs only when it serves the interests of the bourgeoisie or as a response to pressure from the independent action of the masses. To view the granting of equality, let alone "full political and social equality," as an inherent task of the bourgeois revolution is to beautify the bourgeois revolution and glorify bourgeois democracy.

The Black Nation thesis' view of history rests upon exactly that bourgeois idealism. Incomplete democracy such as slavery or sharecropping is equated with an uncompleted bourgeois democratic revolution. Full democracy, including the elimination of Black oppression, is seen as a fundamental class interest of the bourgeoisie which failed to attain it only because it "betrayed" its "historic class interests" both in the American Revolution and Civil War/Reconstruction. Similarly, a nation is understood to be a voluntary social contract between people entered into on the basis of equality; thus the lack of such equality means exclusion from the nation.

This populist/revisionist view of history is a form of "American Exceptionalism" which grossly exaggerates the "Grand Democratic Tradition" of this country while lamenting "abnormalities" such as slavery and racism. The Black Nation thesis apologizes for these blemishes against the good name of bourgeois democracy by explaining that slavery was "outside the normal political, social and economic development of the nation as a whole"<sup>40</sup> while the post-Civil War plantation system constituted an altogether separate nation. In this view,

the overthrow of Black oppression simply means fulfilling the promises of the Founding Fathers, or in their own words, to "complete the bourgeois democratic revolution." This is indeed a pitiful excuse for Marxism-Leninism.

## VII. Critique of the Political Strategy of the Black Nation Thesis

This section of our critique focuses on the political strategy flowing from the Black Nation thesis, a strategy based on the demand for self-determination for the Black Belt nation. Several factors make this task difficult. One is that the slogan of "self-determination," common to all versions, is accorded different weight in each of them, while other aspects of the strategy vary considerably. Indeed, the Black Nation thesis' program for Black liberation as a whole changed considerably over the course of time from the Comintern resolutions of 1928 and 1930, through Allen's book in 1936, to Haywood's book in 1948, to present-day versions. We will focus on the program put forward by the Comintern and developed by Allen (summarized in Section I) as it was the most developed, consistent, and revolutionary.

The second problem in analyzing the strategy is that the communist movement's implementation of the thesis was extremely inconsistent. Initially the demand for self-determination seems to have been the central focus of the CPUSA's propaganda and political work and was adopted by the party-led League of Struggle for Negro Rights. By the mid-1930s, however, it was subordinated to the demand for equal rights, and popular propaganda and agitation about the oppressed Negro Nation seems to have receded drastically. In 1944, Browder abruptly announced that Negroes had already exercised their right of self-determination by integrating into the U.S. nation, but this line was reversed and the demand for the right of self-determination for the oppressed Black Nation was reasserted as part of the post-Browder rectification. However, the right of self-determination never regained its former prominence, even in Haywood's *Negro Liberation*. When the New Communist Movement resurrected the Black Nation thesis, all consistency vanished. Each group developed a distinct and frequently contradictory political program concerning the anti-racist struggle despite their nominal upholding of the right of self-determination.

Our main criticism is that the program conciliates both nationalism and racism. The thesis was adopted as part of an ultra-left swing in the CPUSA and the Comintern and contained elements that lent themselves to "left" deviations. But overall the logic of the line is rightist as its centerpiece is that the solution to Black oppression is completion of the bourgeois democratic revolution rather than socialism.

This critique will begin by noting what we consider to be the strengths of the Black Nation thesis' political strategy and program. We will then critique its basic strategy for the liberation of the oppressed Black Nation, self-determination, and the class analysis accompanying it. We then take up its program for non-Black Belt Blacks. We end with a critique of the view that Blacks have the right of self-determination even though they are not a nation, a view which has surfaced within the communist ranks as the Black Nation thesis is increasingly isolated.

### A. Political Strengths of the Black Nation Thesis

The Black Nation thesis marked a qualitative step forward for the U.S. communist movement and was, in our opinion, the most advanced political position being advanced at the time it was adopted.\* The thesis was a qualitative break with the liquidationist line of the old Socialist Party and the theoretical and political inconsistency of the pre-1930 line of the CPUSA. Its strengths propelled the party to the center of the anti-racist struggle throughout the 1930s.

What were these strengths?

First, the thesis put forward the view that Black oppression was a particular form of oppression that required a comprehensive theoretical and historical understanding and special political strategy and program to combat it.

Second, the thesis understood that the struggle against Black oppression was a revolutionary struggle in its own right, and that it was key to the proletarian revolution as a whole in the U.S.

Third, the thesis grasped the centrality of the plantation system to the oppression of Black people at that time, exposed its cruelty and backwardness, and called for its overthrow.

Fourth, the thesis held that the struggle against Black oppression (and

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\*The Black Nation thesis was adopted in the midst of a fierce line struggle within the Comintern and the CPUSA. The most substantial opposing line was advanced by A. Shiek (sometimes translated as Endre Sik), a Hungarian teacher at Moscow's University of the Toilers of the East (KUTVA), and published in *The Comintern Programme and the Racial Problem, The Communist International*, No. 16, August 15, 1928. In certain ways Shiek's line was theoretically more advanced than the Black Nation thesis in that he rejected the national question framework to analyze Black oppression, and began a materialist and revolutionary assessment of the racial question. However his analysis failed to account for the central expression of Black oppression at the time, the plantation system, concentrating instead on Black industrial workers. Consequently his line could provide precious little political guidance to the anti-racist struggle. Jay Lovestone also opposed the thesis, correctly contending that capitalism would break up the plantation system. However, his view was that capitalism would, by so doing, also end Black oppression. His was a thoroughly liquidationist line.

white chauvinism) was in the interest of the U.S. working class as a whole.

Fifth, it recognized the importance of the Black liberation movement as a revolutionary force in U.S. society.

The Black Nation thesis thus concentrated itself into a definite practical political program: for confiscation of the plantations, for Black political power and state unity in areas of Black majority, against Jim Crow and for equality among workers, and against every manifestation of white chauvinism in the U.S., the working class, and the party itself.

However, the political strengths of the program were enveloped in a qualitatively inaccurate theoretical framework and political strategy—that of national liberation—which distorted many of these understandings, undercut many of the strengths, and produced serious political disorientation. The Black Nation thesis was an incorrect line with some positive elements, not a correct line with some shortcomings.

### B. Critique of the National Liberation Strategy and Class Analysis

The view that the Black Belt was an oppressed nation dominated by a semi-feudal economy led the thesis to call for a strategy of national democratic revolution that has since been proven correct for underdeveloped colonies and neo-colonies such as Vietnam, Mozambique, and Nicaragua. This revolution is seen as national because it must kick U.S. imperialism out of the country and establish political power based on self-determination. It is seen as bourgeois democratic because it will bring the semi-feudal system to an end and eliminate all feudal remnants. The national democratic revolution would create a Negro republic in the Black Belt that would exercise its right of self-determination by forming an independent nation-state or by federating with the White Nation on the basis of equality. This anti-imperialist, anti-feudal revolution would lay the basis for a second, socialist revolutionary stage.

The strategy of anti-imperialist, national revolution is applicable only to colonies, neo-colonies, and oppressed nations. But since there was no oppressed Black Nation in reality, this strategy actually promotes reformist and nationalist illusions: nationalist illusions because it holds out the possibility of an independent Black Nation that has no material basis in reality; reformist illusions because it holds out the possibility of ridding the Black Belt and the country of racism without overthrowing U.S. imperialism. National liberation struggles do not require the smashing of the bourgeoisie of the oppressor nation, only the ending of oppressive relations between the oppressor nation and the oppressed nation. The strategy of national liberation to win the right of self-determination flowing from the Black Nation thesis, then, was qualitatively incorrect and misleading and did not provide a solution to Black oppression.

This reformist, nationalist strategy is compounded by the vision of a bourgeois democratic revolution against a semi-feudal plantation system. Not only did the thesis mistakenly assess that system to be semi-feudal, it also simplistically attributed all Black oppression not only in the Black Belt but throughout the entire U.S. to have its source in that system, thus equating the ending of Black oppression with smashing the plantation system. Then, in an ultra-left passion, the thesis asserted that this anti-feudal task was "revolutionary" because capitalism had exhausted its potential to uproot the semi-feudal plantation system and replace it with capitalist agriculture. Consequently, the task of "completing the bourgeois democratic revolution" fell to the national democratic revolution of the oppressed Black Nation led by the proletariat.

History has long since refuted this fundamental tenet of the Black Nation thesis. The labor-intensive plantation system has been replaced by a system of highly mechanized agriculture without any significant change in the intensity or pervasiveness of Black oppression. While the plantation system was once the main form of Black oppression, it was never its essence. As a result, the Black Nation thesis promotes the bourgeois liberal illusion that the oppression of Black people is rooted in pre-capitalist remnants ("supported by imperialism") and that only the extension of good old bourgeois democracy is needed to eliminate it. In reality, racism is a fundamental foundation of the capitalist social order in the U.S., and the struggle against it must be anti-capitalist and socialist in character.

The strategy of national democratic revolution also carries with it a particular assessment of class forces in the revolution. In real national democratic, anti-imperialist revolutions, not only the proletariat, but also the peasantry, the petit bourgeoisie, and the national bourgeoisie have a *strategic class interest* in defeating foreign imperialism and winning the right of self-determination ("the united front against imperialism"), even though there is contention within the united front, and the bourgeoisie and the proletariat have antagonistic visions of the nature of post-revolutionary society.

This class analysis does not apply to Black liberation. It is true that both the Black bourgeoisie and the Black petit bourgeoisie have an interest in the struggle for equal rights, equal opportunities, and other anti-racist reforms in order to advance their class interests within capitalism. But neither of them has a strategic class interest in revolutionizing U.S. society. The Black bourgeoisie, such as it is, is only a sector of the U.S. bourgeoisie and as such must defend capitalism or perish, even though some individual Black capitalists may decide to commit class suicide and side with the revolution. Likewise, the Black petit bourgeoisie is part of the U.S. petit bourgeois class. Because of the inherent instability of the petit bourgeoisie under monopoly capitalism, and because the Black petit bourgeoisie is especially vulnerable due to

racism, it is likely that large numbers of individuals from this class will be pressed into the proletariat or will unite with the Black workers to carry the struggle against racism through to the end. But as a class, the Black petit bourgeoisie vacillates on the question of revolution.

The national liberation struggle framework, then, misidentifies the class forces, transforming a class enemy (the Black bourgeoisie) and a vacillating class ally (the Black petit bourgeoisie) into strategic class allies of the revolutionary proletariat. Such a class analysis is correct for real national liberation struggles, but not for the Black liberation struggle.

This faulty class analysis, flowing from the Black Nation thesis, surfaces in both "left" and right errors, depending on how it is concretely carried through. For example, the thesis has a pronounced tendency to overestimate the number and strength of the Black bourgeoisie, mistakenly categorizing many petit bourgeois and even working class elements in that category in order to strengthen the argument for a Black national economy. This usually leads to "left" errors in the realm of politics. Also the absence of an oppressed nation means that there is no objective distinction between a Black "national" bourgeoisie and a Black "comprador" bourgeoisie, so this crucial class distinction is left to the subjective whim of the Black Nation theorists. Consequently there were times when all Black bourgeois elements (and even petit bourgeois elements) were branded "comprador capitalists," hence imperialist enemies of the national liberation movement. At other times, most or all Black capitalists were considered "national bourgeoisie," to be strategically united with and conciliated. Overall, the class analysis of the national democratic revolution strategy overestimated the revolutionary potential of the Black bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie and allowed subjective criteria to run rampant.

The Black Nation thesis also conciliates both racism and narrow nationalism. It objectively turns white people into "supporters" of a Black national liberation struggle and places the onus of the struggle against racism upon Black people to "free their nation." In this way, the struggle against Black oppression becomes a latter-day Roman spectacle in which Blacks are gladiators and whites are spectators. It is a measure of the infiltrated racism in the thesis that it translates the special *stake* Blacks have in dismantling racism into a special *task* reserved for Blacks, a view which continues to dominate the thinking of much of the left, including many who oppose the Black Nation thesis. The Black Nation thesis relieves whites of the difficult and unpopular task of taking up the struggle against Black oppression as their own struggle, thereby promoting the worst kind of bourgeois moralism, liberal racism, and anti-racist posturing.

At the same time, the thesis conciliates narrow bourgeois nationalism among Blacks by promoting the illusory goal of an independent Black

Nation where, presumably, whites could not meddle. The thesis also promotes a separate national liberation movement for Blacks only. Of course this "concession" to Black nationalism carries the stipulation that Blacks surrender claim to the gigantic productive forces in the White Nation that they and their ancestors, North and South, gave their life's blood to create. In this "equal exchange," the "heroic nationalists" of the Black Nation receive a backward American-style bantustan in the Black Belt South, a ghettoized "historic homeland" if there ever was one. This done, the "natural separation of the races" (now called "nationalities") so ardently yearned for by every racist since 1607 will have been achieved, led by the "Marxist-Leninists." In the meantime, the movement will have a division of labor: nationalism for Blacks and Marxism for whites.

### C. "Equal Rights for the Negro National Minority"

Following classical Marxist theory on the national question, the Black Nation thesis holds that Blacks who did not live in the Black Belt itself were an oppressed national minority and that the appropriate political demand for them was "equal rights." Applying this view more concretely to the U.S., Black Nation theorists argued that Northern racism was, in essence, the "shadow of the plantation" casting its pall on the situation confronting Black people everywhere.

According to this reasoning, the oppressive condition of the Negro national minority outside the Black Belt was due to the constant threat of having to return to the Black Belt where conditions were even more oppressive. It was this "shadow of the plantation," in effect, that coerced Blacks into the industrial reserve, into low paying jobs, and into segregated communities. Remove this shadow through winning the right of self-determination and dismantling the plantation system, and the principal basis for Black oppression in U.S. society as a whole would also be removed. Meanwhile, the main political demand of the Negro national minority should be for "equal rights."

The fundamental problem with this perspective is that it has no analysis of the motive force or roots of Black oppression within capitalism itself, seeing it as a remnant or extension of precapitalist agricultural relations. From there it is but one step to seeing racism merely as a leftover ideology from an earlier period and, if not inimical to capitalism, clearly not a pillar of the capitalist mode of production either.

For the Black Nation thesis, the revolutionary aspect of the struggle against Black oppression is confined to the demand for self-determination for the Black Nation while the struggle outside that nation is essentially a reform struggle for "equal rights." Within the national question framework, "equal rights" refers only to equal *political* rights, not to what is often termed the social and economic struggle for equality

of condition as well. The struggle for equal rights principally means the ending of legal restrictions so that oppressed nationalities would be afforded the same legal rights that everyone else enjoys under bourgeois democracy.

This is not said to diminish the significance of the struggle for equal rights. In the 1930s especially, when Jim Crow laws operated throughout the country, when segregation in public as well as private life was widespread, when labor unions, public halls, residential neighborhoods, and many professions could legally bar Blacks from entry, the demand for equal rights was a crucial aspect of the struggle against racism. However, the demand for equal rights, while clearly an important expression of the struggle against racism as it manifests itself in day-to-day life, does not capture the revolutionary character of the anti-racist struggle. Operating out of this framework, the party, even in its best days, could not move beyond the level of militant reformism in the struggle against racism. In its worst days, it functioned as little more than a tail on the NAACP.

Whatever shortcomings the Black Nation thesis had in this respect in the '30s have been magnified qualitatively since then. As the plantation system was broken up and the majority of Black people migrated to the cities of the North and South, the fact that Black oppression remained fixed in the very fabric of U.S. life clearly demonstrated the emptiness of the "shadow of the plantation" formulation, and the Black Nation thesis became patently implausible on the theoretical level.

Just as clearly, the enactment of civil rights legislation and the formal ending of most forms of legal discrimination based on race, without any significant lessening of Black oppression, demonstrated the inadequacy of the "equal rights" aspect of the formulation. The suggestion that the elimination of the racist social relations in which Black people are locked is dependent on an illusory self-determination in what remains one of the most economically backward sections of the U.S. only adds insult to injury.

These were problems in the Black Nation thesis from the very beginning. The Comintern and others realized the inadequacy of the "equal rights" formulation and added on demands for social and economic equality to partially fill the gap. Even these fall short of identifying the anti-capitalist character of the Black liberation struggle. Indeed, the logic of the thesis itself actually liquidates the revolutionary character of the struggle against Black oppression by limiting it to winning self-determination for a non-existent nation and equal rights for a supposed national minority. Today, because the political strategy flowing from the thesis no longer has any significant material basis, the various groups who still hold the line have developed wildly varying political programs. Pragmatism reigns supreme when a line lacks

objectivity and cannot guide practice. Consequently, so long as the communist movement remains prisoner to the national question framework for analyzing Black oppression, it will never be able to extricate itself from an inherently reformist and pragmatist tendency in the anti-racist struggle.\*

#### D. Self-Determination Without a Nation?

As the Black Nation thesis has fallen apart theoretically, there has developed a clearly pragmatist tendency which concedes that Blacks are not a nation but tries to maintain the demand of self-determination anyway.

Undoubtedly this tendency has some positive impulses: the attempt to respond to the spontaneous demand for self-determination that came to the fore in the late 1960s; the attempt to combat the prevalent practice among Marxist-Leninists of dismissing Black nationalism and Black nationalists as inherently reactionary; the hope that this demand would help to fight racism among white workers; a positive assessment of the results of the practice based on this slogan in Russia and China; etc. Nonetheless, this line of reasoning is fruitless, representing an abject surrender of the struggle for a scientific theory and line in favor of pragmatic tailism and nationalist prejudice.

The liberating revolutionary national movements in Vietnam and elsewhere in the 1960s served as an inspiration to the people's movement in the U.S., part of which adopted the slogan of the right of self-determination from these movements. In fact, a prevalent spontaneous prejudice arose that the "right of self-determination" was nothing less than a moral imperative that applied to every oppressed grouping or even

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\*PWOC is a case in point. Although PWOC holds that the Black Nation dissolved in the 1950s, it nonetheless maintains the national framework and considers Blacks an oppressed national minority throughout the U.S. Having resurrected the Black Nation line only to declare the nation dissolved, PWOC is left with no theoretical analysis of the material basis and content of Black oppression. Inevitably this theoretical failure is reflected in politically downplaying the struggle against racism. For example, PWOC and other adherents of its "dissolution" line long opposed super-seniority on the basis that it would antagonize some white workers and thereby undermine "working class unity." More recently, PWOC denounced the formation of the National Black Independent Political Party, an anti-capitalist, Black mass organization, on the basis that it would forestall the creation of a multi-national workers party "sometime in the future." Having trivialized the material content of racism, PWOC concentrates on expunging white chauvinism, which it sees as an ideological weapon of the bourgeoisie to divide the working class. This idealist view surfaced with a vengeance in the OCIC's campaign against white chauvinism. The penalty for theoretical unclarity is always political opportunism.

individual. It seemed that the only alternative to self-determination was oppression; if one could not determine one's own destiny, then obviously someone else would. In some revolutionary ranks it became "common sense" that the most revolutionary of all demands was the right of self-determination. While the right of self-determination was a powerful slogan for the liberation of oppressed nations throughout the world, it became a generalized, abstract slogan expressing dissatisfaction with the forces that shape people's lives under capitalism. In this sense, it was undoubtedly a progressive slogan in its 1960s heyday.

However, precisely because it had no particular meaning, it was soon co-opted and utilized to promote everything from "Black capitalism" to bourgeois maneuvers to split the people's movement. While it is true that this slogan is being revitalized by certain progressive forces within the Black liberation movement, it is not the task of communists to tail after such forces. Rather it is our task to bring Marxist science to bear to unravel the bewildering array of contradictions that make up bourgeois society, and based on that understanding, to develop a scientific strategy and tactics to guide the mass struggle.

For Marxist-Leninists, the "right of self-determination" has a theoretically precise and historically grounded meaning. It is a democratic political demand, the essence of which is to unfetter the development of classes and the class struggle by removing the oppressive interference of the bourgeoisie of one nation in the internal class struggle of another nation. It applies only to nations because only nations are the unit of class formation and class struggle under capitalism. The demand for self-determination includes the right to form a separate state apparatus, which is the basis for equality between nations. The right of self-determination does not speak directly to the class nature of the liberated nation or its state, and as noted, in Section III, it is a slogan that various classes, including the national bourgeoisie, can unite with. It is also a demand strictly subordinate to the class demands of the international proletariat, so that only those national movements that are of a historically progressive nature are supported by communists. Communists agitate for independence in the form of secession only in those cases when the formation of a distinct nation-state will create better conditions for the unfolding of the class struggle. Thus, the right to self-determination is by no means an absolute principle, let alone the guiding principle of communism.

The right of self-determination must not be separated from its materialist moorings as the right of a nation to form a state in the interests of the full development of a capitalist or socialist national economy. The objective conditions of national life, including a territory and an economy, must already be in existence or the call for self-determination—in its precise Marxist sense—can have disastrous and reactionary consequences.

The most glaring example of the reactionary political consequences of the call for self-determination in the absence of the actual conditions for national life is the state of Israel. In order to create a common economic life on a common territory for Jewish people, the territory of the Palestinian nation was usurped. The fact that after more than 30 years of incredible hardship, the Palestinian nation is not broken up but resolutely fights for its self-determination gives us a glimpse into how stubborn a real nation is and how the nature of its struggle reinforces the actual national identity of its people.

To uphold the right of self-determination for groupings other than nations obscures the real relations in society. In particular, in the U.S., such a slogan applied to Black people distorts the actual relation between race and class and between racism and capitalism. Far from advancing the struggle against Black oppression, it actually diverts it onto a path which cannot lead to the liberation of the Black masses.

### VIII. Conclusion

It will not be easy for our movement to reject the Black Nation thesis. This line has conditioned the theoretical, historical, and political work of the communist movement for half a century and once helped to advance the movement's understanding of Black oppression as a central question of the U.S. revolution. Nevertheless, as we have amply demonstrated, this line and the theory underlying it have no foundation in historical and social reality and gravely disorient the communist movement.

The thesis attempts to account for the reality of Black oppression but ends up hopelessly distorting the economic and political history of Black people, the South and the U.S. by refracting it through the lens of the oppressed nation framework. At times this error appears to be merely innocuous, but all too often it promotes illusions about bourgeois democracy, reproduces racist ideology, and distorts Marxist theory beyond recognition. Moreover, the political strategy proposed by the thesis reflects its inability to grasp the roots of racism in the capitalist social order and consequently misdirects the Black and working class movements. The Black Nation thesis, therefore, must be subjected to thorough criticism and rejected.

A cogent critique of an incorrect line, however, is only half the task of reorienting the communist movement on this vital revolutionary question. More difficult is the task of developing a more scientific, historically accurate, and revolutionary analysis of Black oppression that can lay the basis for a comprehensive political strategy to eliminate it.

The second part of this article, to appear in the next issue of *Line of March*, will be largely devoted to contributing to this urgent task. In it we will elaborate an alternative theoretical and political framework for analyzing Black oppression and Black liberation. Some of the broad outlines of our analysis have been implicitly or explicitly stated in the

course of this critique, especially our view that Black oppression is racial oppression and Black people are a racially oppressed people. However, the next article will construct this analysis in a more comprehensive way, with the aim of bringing the movement's theoretical work on this question to a new level for struggle and debate, and laying the basis for rectification of our political work as well. Topics to be covered include the particularity of racial oppression, a dialectical analysis of racial categories, the relationship of racism and capitalism and the associated relationship between race and class, Black people as a racially oppressed people, the "white united front," the relationship of white workers to the struggle against racism, "super-exploitation" as a theoretical concept, the distinction and interconnection of racial and national oppression, and the political strategy for Black liberation.

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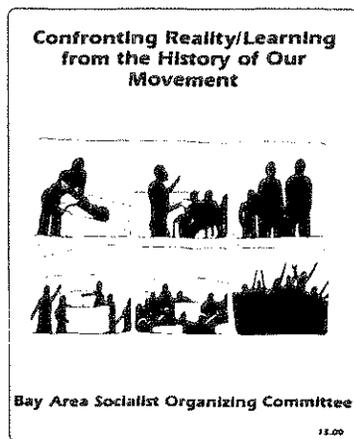
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- 17 Haywood, *Negro Liberation*, p. 138.
- 18 Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol. I (New York: International Publishers, 1972) p. 72.
- 19 Haywood, *Negro Liberation*, p. 140.

- 20 Allen, *Negro Question in the U.S.*, p. 15.  
 21 *Ibid.*, p. 14.  
 22 Haywood, *Negro Liberation*, p. 15.  
 23 Allen, *Negro Question in the U.S.*, p. 15.  
 24 RU, *Red Papers No. 5*, p. 33.  
 25 CP (M-L), *Documents from the Founding Congress of the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist)* (Chicago: 1977) p. 129.  
 26 Haywood, *Negro Liberation*, p. 143.  
 27 *Ibid.*, p. 194.  
 28 PWOC, *Black Liberation*, p. 22.  
 29 *Ibid.*, p. 39.  
 30 See, for example, Detroit Marxist-Leninist Organization, *National Question Position Paper on Black Americans*, 1978, p. 3, unpublished.  
 31 Marx, *Capital* Vol. III, pp. 879-880.  
 32 Haywood, *Negro Liberation*, p. 35.  
 33 PWOC, *Black Liberation*, p. 20.  
 34 *Ibid.*, p. 21.  
 35 *Ibid.*, p. 21.  
 36 *Ibid.*, p. 17.  
 37 Marx, *Capital* Vol. I, p. 762.  
 38 Haywood, *Negro Liberation*, pp. 142-43.  
 39 Marx, *Capital* Vol. I, p. 751.  
 40 PWOC, *Black Liberation*, p. 17.

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## Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States

*Final Text, Confirmed by the Political Commission of the E.C.C.I.\**

*In 1928 and 1930 the Communist International passed resolutions on the Negro Question. The 1930 resolution was meant to clear up many of the theoretical and programmatic ambiguities of the earlier version. It represents the first coherent presentation of the view that Blacks in the U.S. constituted an oppressed nation and that the appropriate program for Black liberation was the struggle for self-determination of the Negro population in the Black Belt. The 1930 resolution is the foundation for the many variations of the Black Nation line that have been developed in the U.S. communist movement over the past thirty years. Below are several excerpts from the resolution.*

In the interest of the utmost clarity of ideas on this question, the Negro question in the United States must be viewed from the standpoint of its peculiarity, namely, as the question of an *oppressed nation*, which is in a peculiar and extraordinarily distressing situation of national oppression not only in view of the prominent *racial distinctions* (marked difference in the color of skin, etc.), but above all, because of considerable *social antagonism* (remnants of slavery). This introduces into the American Negro question an important, *peculiar* trait which is absent from the national question of other oppressed peoples. Furthermore, it is necessary to face clearly the inevitable distinction between the position of the Negro in the *South* and in the *North*; owing to the fact that at least three-fourths of the entire *Negro* population of the United States (12,000,000) live in compact masses in the South, most of them being peasants and agricultural laborers in a state of semi-serfdom, settled in the "Black Belt"

\*From the official text as originally published in *The Communist*, theoretical journal of the Communist Party USA.

and constituting the majority of the population, whereas the Negroes in the northern states are for the most part industrial workers of the lowest categories who have recently come to the various industrial centers from the South (having often even fled from there).

The struggle of the Communists for the *equal rights* of the Negroes applies to all Negroes, in the North as well as in the South. The struggle for this slogan embraces all or almost all of the important special interests of the Negroes in the North, but not in the South, where the main Communist slogan must be: *The Right of Self-Determination of the Negroes in the Black Belt*. These two slogans, however are most closely connected. The Negroes in the North are very much interested in winning the right of self-determination of the Negro population of the Black Belt and can thereby hope for strong support for the establishment of true equality of the Negroes in the North. In the South the Negroes are suffering no less, but still more than in the North from the glaring lack of all equality; for the most part the struggle for their most urgent partial demands in the Black Belt is nothing more than the struggle for their equal rights, and only the fulfillment of their main slogan, the right of self-determination in the Black Belt, can assure them of true equality. . . .

3. The demand for equal rights in our sense of the word, means not only demanding the same rights for the Negroes as the whites have in the United States at the present time, but also demanding that the Negroes should be granted all rights and other advantages which we demand for the corresponding oppressed classes of whites (workers and other toilers). Thus in our sense of the word, the demand for equal rights means a continuous work of abolishment of all forms of economic and political oppression of the Negroes, as well as their social exclusion, the insults perpetrated against them and their segregation. This is to be obtained by constant struggle by the white and black workers for effective legal protection for the Negroes in all fields, as well as actual enforcement of their equality and the combating of every expression of Negrophobia. One of the first Communist slogans is: Death for Negro lynching! . . .

6. Owing to the peculiar situation in the Black Belt (the fact that the majority of the resident Negro population are farmers and agricultural laborers and that the capitalist economic system as well as political class rule there is not only of a special kind, but to a great extent still has pre-capitalist and semi-colonial features), the right of self-determination of the Negroes as the *main slogan* of the Communist Party in the Black Belt is appropriate. This, however, does not in any way mean that the struggle for equal rights of the Negroes in the Black Belt is less necessary or less well founded than it is in the North. On the contrary, here, owing to the whole situation, this struggle is even better founded; but the form of this slogan does not sufficiently correspond with the *concrete* requirements of the liberation struggle of the Negro population. Anyway, it is clear that in most cases it is a question of the daily conflicts of interest between the Negroes and the white rulers in the Black Belt on the subject of infringement of the most elementary equality rights of the Negroes by the whites. Daily events of the kind are: all Negro persecutions, all arbitrary economic acts of robbery by the white exploiters ("Black Man's Burden") and the whole system of so-called "Jim-Crowism." Here, however, it is very important in connection with all these

concrete cases of conflict to concentrate the attention of the Negro masses not so much on the general demands of mere equality, but much more on some of the revolutionary *basic demands* arising from the concrete situation.

The slogan of the right of self-determination occupies the central place in the liberation struggle of the Negro population in the Black Belt against the yoke of American imperialism. But this slogan, as we see it, must be carried out only in connection with two other basic demands. Thus, there are three basic demands to be kept in mind in the Black Belt, namely, the following:

(a) *Confiscation of the landed property of the white landowners and capitalists for the benefit of the Negro farmers.* The landed property in the hands of the white American exploiters constitutes the most important material basis of the entire system of national oppression and serfdom of the Negroes in the Black Belt. More than three-quarters of all Negro farmers here are bound in actual serfdom to the farms and plantations of the white exploiters by the feudal system of "share cropping." Only on paper and not in practice are they freed from the yoke of their former slavery. The same holds completely true for the great mass of black contract laborers. Here the contract is only the capitalist expression of the chains of the old slavery, which even today are not infrequently applied in their natural iron form on the roads of the Black Belt (chain gang work). These are the main forms of present Negro slavery in the Black Belt, and no breaking of the chains of this slavery is possible without confiscating all the landed property of the white masters. Without this revolutionary measure, without the agrarian revolution, the right of self-determination of the Negro population would be only a Utopia or, at best, would remain only on paper without changing in any way the actual enslavement.

(b) *Establishment of the state unity of the Black Belt.* At the present time this Negro zone—precisely for the purpose of facilitating national oppression—is artificially split up and divided into a number of various states which include distant localities having a majority of white population. If the right of self-determination of the Negroes is to be put into force, it is necessary wherever possible to bring together into one governmental unit all districts of the South where the majority of the settled population consists of Negroes. Within the limits of this state there will of course remain a fairly significant white minority, which must submit to the right of self-determination of the Negro majority. There is no other possible way of carrying out in a democratic manner the right of self-determination of the Negroes. Every plan regarding the establishment of the Negro state with an exclusively Negro population in America (and of course, still more exporting it to Africa) is nothing but an unreal and reactionary caricature of the fulfillment of the right of self-determination of the Negroes, and every attempt to isolate and transport the Negroes would have the most damaging effect upon their interests. Above all, it would violate the right of the Negro farmers in the Black Belt not only to their present residences and their land, but also to the land owned by the white landlords and cultivated by Negro labor.

(c) *Right of self-determination.* This means complete and unlimited right of the Negro majority to exercise governmental authority in the entire territory of the Black Belt, as well as to decide upon the relations between their territory and other nations, particularly the United States. It would not be right of self-determination in our sense of the word if the Negroes in the Black Belt had the right of determination only in cases which concerned *exclusively* the Negroes

and did not affect the whites, because the most important cases arising here are bound to affect the whites as well as Negroes. First of all, true right to self-determination means that the Negro majority and not the white minority in the entire territory of the administratively united Black Belt exercises the right of administering governmental, legislative, and judicial authority. At the present time all this power is concentrated in the hands of the white bourgeoisie and landlords. It is they who appoint all officials, it is they who dispose of public property, it is they who determine the taxes, it is they who govern and make the laws. Therefore, *the overthrow of this class rule* in the Black Belt is unconditionally necessary in the struggle for the Negroes' right to self-determination. This, however, means at the same time the overthrow of the yoke of American imperialism in the Black Belt on which the forces of the local white bourgeoisie depend. Only in this way, only if the Negro population of the Black Belt wins its freedom from American imperialism even to the point of deciding *itself* the relations between its country and other governments, especially the United States, will it win real and complete self-determination. One should demand from the beginning that no armed forces of American imperialism should remain on the territory of the Black Belt.

7. As stated in the letter of the Political Secretariat of the E.C.C.I. of March 16, 1930, the Communists must "*unreservedly* carry on a struggle" for the self-determination of the Negro population in the Black Belt in accordance with what has been set forth above. It is incorrect and harmful to interpret the Communist standpoint to mean that the Communists stand for the right of self-determination of the Negroes only up to a certain point but not beyond this, to, for example, the right of separation. It is also incorrect to say that the Communists are only to carry on propaganda or agitation for the right of self-determination, but not to develop any activity to bring this about. No, it is of the utmost importance for the Communist Party to reject any such limitation of its struggle for this slogan. Even if the situation does not yet warrant the raising of the question of uprising, one should not limit oneself at present to propaganda for the demand, "Right to Self-Determination," but should organize mass actions, such as demonstrations, strikes, tax boycott movements, etc.

Moreover, the Party cannot make its stand for this slogan dependent upon any conditions, even the condition that the proletariat has the hegemony in the national revolutionary Negro movement or that the majority of the Negro population in the Black Belt adopts the Soviet form (as Pepper demanded), etc. It goes without saying that the Communists in the Black Belt will and must try to win over all working elements of the Negroes, that is, the majority of the population, to their side and to convince them not only that they must win the right of self-determination but also that they must make use of this right in accordance with the Communist program. But this cannot be made a *condition* for the stand of the Communists in favor of the right of self-determination of the Negro population. If, or so long as, the majority of this population wishes to handle the situation in the Black Belt in a different manner from that which we Communists would like, its complete right to self-determination must be recognized. This right we must defend as a free democratic right. . . .

12. The struggle regarding the Negro question in the North must be linked up with the liberation struggle in the South, in order to endow the Negro movement

throughout the United States with the necessary effective strength. After all, in the North, as well as in the South, it is a question of the real emancipation of the American Negroes, which has in fact never taken place. The Communist Party of the United States must bring into play its entire revolutionary energy, in order to mobilize the widest possible masses of the white and black proletariat of the United States, not by words, but by deeds, for real effective support of the struggle for the liberation of the Negroes. Enslavement of the Negroes is one of the most important foundations of the imperialist dictatorship of United States capitalism. The more American imperialism fastens its yoke on the millions-strong Negro masses, the more must the Communist Party develop the mass struggle for Negro emancipation, and the better use it must make of all conflicts which arise out of the national difference, as an incentive for revolutionary mass actions against the bourgeoisie. This is as much in the direct interest of the proletarian revolution in America. Whether the rebellion of the Negroes is to be the outcome of a general revolutionary situation in the United States, whether it is to originate in the whirlpool of decisive fights for power by the working class, for proletarian dictatorship, or whether on the contrary the Negro rebellion will be the prelude of gigantic struggles for power by the American proletariat, cannot be foretold now. But in either contingency it is essential for the Communist Party to *make an energetic beginning now—at the present moment*—with the organization of *joint mass struggles* of white and black workers against Negro oppression. This alone will enable us to get rid of the bourgeois white chauvinism which is polluting the ranks of the white workers in America, to overcome the distrust of the Negro masses caused by the inhuman barbarous Negro slave traffic still carried on by the American bourgeoisie—in as much as it is directed even against all white workers—and to win over to our side these millions of Negroes as active fellow-fighters in the struggle for the overthrow of bourgeois power throughout America.

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