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FOR THE MATERIALIST CONCEPTION OF THE NEGRO QUESTION

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FOR THE MATERIALIST CONCEPTION OF THE NEGRO QUESTION

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1. Nationalism and the Negro Struggle

For a number of months both Comrade Breitman and myself have been working toward the opening of this discussion of the Negro question. Both, I believe, with the hope that we could enter it on common ground. But it is obvious that we cannot: we have a difference upon the fundamental question of the relationship between the Negro struggle in the United States and the struggle of oppressed nations, that is, the national question.

I cannot challenge Comrade Breitman's authority to represent the tradition of the past period, for he has been the spokesman for the Party on this question for most of the past fifteen years.

On the other hand I am opposed to the nationalist conception of the Negro question which is contained not only in Comrade Breitman's article, "On the Negro Struggle, etc.," (Discussion Bulletin A-21, Sept. 1954), but is implicit in the resolution on the Negro question of the 1948 Convention.

The Negro question in the U.S. was first introduced into the radical movement as a subject worthy of special consideration during the early years of the Communist International. But it was introduced as an appendage to the colonial and national questions of Europe and Asia.

This is not its proper place. For the Negro question, while bearing superficial similarity to the colonial and national questions is fundamentally different and requires an independent treatment. In the early congresses of the Communist International, American delegates presented points of view on the Negro question. Their speeches reveal the beginning of an attempt to differentiate this question from the main subject matter of the colonial and national questions.

This beginning did not realize any clear demarcation between these questions, and the Comintern in degeneration went backward in this as in all other respects. Under Stalin the subordination of the American Negro question to the national and colonial questions was crystallized.

It is the historical task of Trotskyism to tear the Negro question in the United States away from the national question and to establish it as an independent political problem, that it may be judged on its own merits, and its laws of development discovered.

This process was begun by the founding leaders of American Trotskyism as expressed in the position defended by Swabeck in 1933

in his discussions with Trotsky. It is this tradition which I defend rather than that expressed by Comrade Breitman.

2. The Question of Nationalism

The modern nation is exclusively a product of capitalism. It arose in Europe out of the atomization and dispersal of the productive forces which characterized feudalism.

Nations began to emerge with the growth of trade and formed the framework for the production and distribution of commodities on a capitalist basis.

Nationalism has a contradictory historical development in Europe. Trotsky elaborated this difference as the key to understanding the role of the national question in the Russian Revolution. In the first place the nations of western Europe emerged in the unification of petty states around a commercial center. The problem of the bourgeois revolution was to achieve this national unification.

In eastern Europe, Russian nationalism appeared on the scene in the role of the oppressor of many small nations. The problem of national unification in the Russian revolution was the break-up of this oppressive system and to achieve the independence of the small nations.

These were the two basic expressions of the national question in Europe. But these two basic phases of national development, corresponding to different stages in the development of capitalism, each contain a multiplicity of forms and combinations of the two phases are not uncommon.

The national question of Europe reveals problems such as the Scotch rebellions, wherein a nation never emerged; Holland in its revolutionary war against Spain; the peculiarity of the unification of Germany; the rise and break-up of the Austro-Hungarian empire; the revolutionary transformation of the Czarist empire into the USSR; and the many contradictory expressions of national consciousness which were revealed in the October revolution; and lastly, the peculiar phenomenon of the Jews: a nation without a territory.

But even these do not exhaust the national question, for it appears as one of the fundamental problems of the whole colonial revolution, and all the problems of national unification, and national independence, dispersal and unification, of the centrifugal and centripetal forces unleashed by the national question, reappear in new and different forms.

And we have by no means seen everything. The African struggle, as it assumes its mature form will show us another fascinating and unique expression of the national struggle.

What constitutes the basis for nationalism? A people united by a system of commodity exchange, a language and culture expressing the needs of commodity exchange, a territory to contain these elements: all these are elements of nationalism. Which is fundamental to the concept of the nation?

Language is important but not decisive: the Ukraine was so Russified and the Ukrainian language so close to extinction that Luxemburg could refer contemptuously to it as a novelty of the intelligentsia. Yet this did not prevent Ukrainian nationalism, when awakened by the Bolsheviks, to play a decisive role in the Russian revolution, alongside the other nationalities.

It would be convenient to be able to fasten upon geography as a fundamental to nationalism: a common territory where in relative isolation a nation could develop. This has, indeed, been the condition for the existence of nations generally; still it would not satisfy the Jewish nation which existed for centuries without a territory.

The one quality which is common to all and cannot be dispensed with in consideration of any and all of the nations of Europe, of the colonial world -- the one indispensable quality which they all possess, and without which none could exist; including the old nations and the new ones, the large and small, the advanced and the backward, the "classical" and the exceptional -- is the quality of their relation to a system of commodity production and circulation: its capacity to serve as a unit of commodity exchange.

National oppression arises fundamentally out of the suppression of the right of a commodity to fulfill its normal economic function in the process of technological development and to produce and circulate commodities according to the normal laws of capitalist production.

This is at the foundation of the national oppression of every nation in Europe and the colonial world. This is the groundwork out of which national aspirations develop and from which national revolutions emerge. It is this fundamental economic relation of a people to the forces of production which creates the national question and determines the laws of motion of the national struggle. This is just as true of the cases of obscure nationalities who only achieved national consciousness after the October revolution as it was for the Netherlands, or France, or for Poland.

Comrade Breitman is thoughtful not to put words into my mouth. But I wish he were equally thoughtful in not attributing to me ideas which I think he has had every opportunity to know that I do not hold. For when he contends that I am thinking only of the classical examples of the national question, when I deny that the Negro question is a national question, he is very wrong.

The Negro question is not a national question because it lacks the fundamental groundwork for the development of nationalism;

an independent system of commodity exchange, or to be more precise, a mode of life which would make possible the emergence of such a system.

This differentiates the Negro question from the most obscure of all the European national questions, for at the root of each and every one of them is to be found this fundamental relation to the productive forces.

The Negro question is a racial question: a matter of discrimination because of skin color, and that's all.

Because of the fundamental economic problem which was inherent among the oppressed nations of eastern Europe, Lenin foresaw the revolutionary significance of the idea of the right of self-determination.

He applied this to the national question and to it alone. Women are a doubly exploited group in all society. But Lenin never applied the slogan of self-determination to the woman question. It would not make sense. And it doesn't make very much more sense when applied to the Negro question.

It would if the Negroes were a nation. Or the embryo of a "nation within a nation" or a pre-capitalistic people living in an isolated territory which might become the framework for a national system of commodity exchange and capitalist production. Negroes, however, are not victims of national oppression but of racial discrimination. The right of self-determination is not the question which is at stake in their struggle. It is, however, fundamental to the national struggle.

Despite his protestation to the contrary, Comrade Breitman holds to a basically nationalist conception of the Negro struggle.

This is contrary to the fundamental course of the Negro struggle and a vital danger to the party. Comrade Breitman's conception of the unique quality of the Negro movement is explained by him on page 9. In comparison to the nationalist movements of Europe, Asia and Africa he says "Fraser sees one similarity and many differences between them; we see many similarities and one big difference."

Of what does this one big difference consist? According to Comrade Breitman, the only difference between the movement of the Polish nationalists under Czarism and the American Negro today is that the Negro movement "thus far aims solely at acquiring enough force and momentum to break down the barriers that exclude Negroes from American society, showing few signs of aiming at national separatism."

Therefore, the only difference between the Poles and the Negroes is one of consciousness. But this proposition makes a theoretical shambles not only of the Negro question but of the national question too. According to this analysis, any especially oppressed group which expressed group solidarity is automatically a nation.

Or an embryo of a nation. Or an embryo of a nation within a nation. This would apply equally to the women throughout the world and to the untouchables of the caste system of India.

If we must ignore the fundamental economic differences in the oppression of the Polish nation and the Negro people, and conclude that the only difference between them is one of consciousness, then we have not only discarded Lenin's and Trotsky's theses on the national question, but we have completely departed from the materialist conception of history.

It is one thing for Trotsky to say that the fact that there are no cultural barriers between the Negro people and the rest of the residents of the U.S. would not be decisive if the Negroes should actually develop a movement of a separatist nature. But it is an altogether different matter for Breitman to assume that the fundamental economic and cultural conditions which form the groundwork of nationalism have no significance whatever in the consideration of the Negroes as a nation.

The basic error in Negro nationalism in the U.S. is the failure to deal with the material foundation of nationalism in general. This results in the conception that nationalism is only a matter of consciousness without material foundation. The other subordinate arguments which buttress the nationalism conception of the Negro question clearly demonstrate this error.

3. The Negro Struggle and the Russian Revolution

Comrade Breitman's point of view is most clearly revealed in the section of his article entitled "What Can Change Present Trends?"

He proposes that we consider seriously the variant that upon being awakened by the beginning of the proletarian revolution the Negroes will develop a new consciousness which will (or may) impel them along the path of a separatist struggle. He uses Trotsky as his authority both in his specific reference to this possibility in the published conversations of 1939 and also by reference to Trotsky's treatment of the problem of nationalities in the third volume of the History of the Russian Revolution.

The thesis of this trend of thought is as follows: In the Russian Revolution a large number of important oppressed minorities were either so oppressed or so culturally backward that they had no national consciousness. Among some, the process of forced assimilation into the Great Russian imperial orbit was so overwhelming that it was inconceivable to them that they might aspire to be anything but servants of the Great Russian bureaucracy until the revolution opened their eyes to the possibility of self-determination.

Other minorities, such as the Ukrainians and many of the eastern nations, had been overcome by the Great Russians while they were a pre-capitalist tribal community. They never had become nations. History never afforded them the opportunity to develop a

system of commodity production and distribution of their own. Because of the uneven tempo of capitalist development in eastern Europe they were prematurely swept into the entanglements of Russian imperialism before either the production, the consciousness, or the apparatus of nationalism could develop.

Nevertheless, national self-determination was a fundamental condition of their liberation. In some cases this new-found national consciousness took form in the early stages of the revolution. But in others, it was so submerged by the national chauvinism of Great Russia that it was only after the revolution that a genuine nationalism asserted itself.

It is to these nations that we are referred by Comrade Breitman as a historical justification for his conception of the Negro question.

Comrade Breitman says, in effect: There is a sufficient element of identity between these peoples and the Negroes to warrant our using them as examples of what the direction of motion of the Negro struggle might be under revolutionary conditions.

Of course, if we are even to discuss such a possibility we would have to leave aside the fundamental difference between the American Negroes and these nations; that is, the relations of these peoples to the production and distribution of commodities, the type of cultural development which this function reflected, and the geographical homeland which they occupied.

Leaving aside these, we have the question of consciousness again. But in this respect, the Negroes have just as different a problem and history from these peoples as they have in every other respect.

We are dealing principally with those nationalities in the Czarist Empire to whom national consciousness came late. The characteristic of this group was that before the Russian revolution they had had little opportunity for unified struggle, and hence no means of arriving at a fundamental political tendency. That is why their desire for self-determination did not manifest itself in the pre-revolutionary period. In order to find out the ultimate goals for which they are struggling, an oppressed people must first go through a series of elementary struggles. After that they are in a position to go to another stage in which it is possible, under favorable conditions, for them to discover the historic road which truly corresponds to their economic, political, and social development and their relation to the rest of society. In this way the consciousness of the most oppressed nationalities of Czarism seemed to all but the Bolsheviks to be the consciousness of the dominant nation: Great Russia.

How badly they were mistaken was proved in the October revolution and afterward when each one of the suppressed tribes and nations of the Czarist Empire, under the stimulus of Lenin's program for self-determination for the oppressed minorities, found at last a national consciousness.

We are asked to adopt this perspective (or to "leave the door open" for it) for the Negroes in the U.S. The best that can be said for this request is that it would be unwise for us to grant it, as it is based upon superficial reasoning. The Negro movement in the United States is one of the oldest, most continuous and most experienced movements in the entire arena of the class struggle of the world.

What labor movement has even an episodic history before 1848? Practically, only the British. The American labor movement had no real beginning until after the Civil War. The history of a movement can be somewhat measured in the leaders which it produces. Who among us remembers an important American labor leader before William A. Sylvis? But we easily recall Vessey, Turner, Tubman and Douglass.

There were, of course, labor struggles during the pre-Civil War period. But they were dwarfed in importance beside the anti-slavery struggle, because the national question for the American people had not yet been solved. The revolution against Great Britain had established the independence of the U.S., but had produced a regime of dual power between the slave owners and capitalists, with the slave owners politically ascendant.

The whole future of the working class depended, not so much upon organizational achievements against the capitalists, as upon the solution to the question of the slave power ruling the land.

This is the fundamental reason for the belated character of the development of the stable labor movement in the U.S.

Immediately after the question of the slave power was settled, the modern labor movement arose. Although it required a little experience before it could settle upon stable forms, in a rapid succession, the National Labor Union, the Knights of Labor, the AF of L, the IWW arose. All powerful national labor organizations. It was only 20 years after the Civil War that the AF of L was founded.

It has been different for the Negro movement which has been in almost continuous existence as a genuine movement of national scope, definite objectives, and at many times embracing tremendous masses, since the days of the Nat Turner rebellion. Even before this turning point in the Negro struggle, heroes and episodes are neither few nor far between. The Negro people are the most highly organized section of the population of the country. They have had an infinite variety of experience in struggle, and are extremely conscious of their goals. These are not goals which have been prescribed for them by the ruling class, but on the contrary, the very opposite of everything the ruling class has tried to enforce. They are moreover the most politically advanced section of American society.

How in the name of common sense, much less of dialectical logic, can you propose that we seriously compare the Negroes to the

oppressed tribes and obscure peasant nations of Czarist Russia, who never had ten years of continuous struggle, as compared with the centuries of continuous Negro struggle? Peoples who never had an opportunity to find out whether or not they had a basis for nationalism because of the overwhelming force of Great Russian assimilation, compared to the Negroes who have been given every opportunity to discover a basis for nationalism, precisely in forced segregation?

There are a number of historical reasons why the Negroes have never adopted a nationalist perspective, and why the normal mode of struggle for them has been anti-separatist.

But first it should be understood that it is in keeping with the nature of the Negro movement to regard its history as continuous from the days of slavery. The Negro question appeared upon the scene as a class question: The Negroes were slaves. But alongside of this grew the race question: all slaves were Negroes and the slave was designated as inferior and subhuman. This was the origin of the Negro question.

The abolition of slavery destroyed the property relations of the chattel slave system. But the plantation system survived, fitting the social relations of slavery to capitalist property relations.

Because of these unsolved problems left over from the second American revolution, the Negroes still struggle against the social relations which were in effect a hundred and fifty and more years ago.

The modern Negro movement dates roughly from the era of the cotton gin -- approximately 1800. The first answer of the Negroes to the intensification of labor brought on by the extension of the cotton acreage was a series of local and regional revolts.

The slaves learned in these struggles that the slave owners were not merely individual lords of the cotton, but were also enthroned on the high seats of the nation's political capital. They had all the laws, police forces, and the armed might of the country at their disposal.

At the same time the Northern capitalists began to feel the domination of the slave power to be too restricting upon their enterprises. The farmers began to feel the pressure of slave labor and the plantation system. These three social forces, the slaves, and the capitalists and the farmers, had in their hands the key to the whole future of the United States as a nation.

Thus the Negroes were thrust into the center of a great national struggle against the slave power. This was the only road by which any assurance of victory was possible.

Because of their position as the most exploited section of the population, each succeeding vital movement of the masses has found the Negroes in a central and advanced position in great inter-

racial struggles against capitalist exploitation. This was true in the Reconstruction, the Radical Populist movement of the South, and finally in the modern labor movement.

4. Negro Culture and Nationalism

The factor of segregation has had the effect of providing one of the potential elements of nationalism. The segregated life of Negro slaves produced a Negro culture a hundred years ago. But language, custom, ideology and culture generally do not have an inherent logic of development. They express the socio-economic forces which bring them into being.

In the examination of Negro culture we are forced to examine first the course of development of Negro life in general. The decisive factor in the development of Negro life during the past century derived from their class position in the Civil War. In the position of that class whose liberation was at stake, as the U.S. confronted slavery, the Negroes were thrust into a central and commanding position in the struggle against the slave power which culminated in the Civil War and Reconstruction.

It was the slaves who built abolitionism, gave it ideological leadership, and a mass body of support. It was their actions which broke-up the class peace between the privileged classes of the North and South. It was their policy which won the Civil War.

These factors expressed the breaking out of the Negro question from the confining limits of a narrow, provincial, local or regional question into the arena of the great national struggles of the American people. The Negroes' culture shared the same fate as did their political economy. Instead of turning further inward upon itself until a completely new and independent language and culture would emerge, the Negro culture assimilated with the national and became the greatest single factor in modifying the basic Anglo-Saxon culture of the United States.

These are expressions of the historical law of mutual assimilation between Negro and white in the United States. The social custom and political edict of segregation expresses race relations in this country. Forced assimilation is the essential expression of national relations in eastern Europe. Mutual assimilation, in defiance of segregation expresses the Negro struggle, just as profoundly as the will to self-determination expresses the struggle of the oppressed nations of eastern Europe.

It appears that the matter of Negro national consciousness, which may occur as the result of the revolution, is for Comrade Breitman an entirely mystical property. It is devoid of any basis in either political economy, culture or history and can be proven only by identifying the Negroes with the "non-classical" nationalities of Czarist Russia who were too backward, too oppressed, too illiterate and primitive, too lacking in consciousness, too unaccustomed to unified struggle to be able to realize that they were embryonic nations.

5. The Secondary Laws of Motion of the Negro Struggle

As should be plain by now, I am not so interested in "closing the door" on self-determination as I am in showing that the Negro struggle is not within the orbit of the national struggle and that it is, therefore, not the question of self-determination which is at stake.

The Negro people in the U.S. have established their fundamental goals without assistance. These goals were dictated to them by their peculiar position in society as the objects of the racial system in its only pure form.

The goals which history has dictated to them are to achieve complete equality through the elimination of racial segregation, discrimination, and prejudice. That is, the overthrow of the race system. It is from these historically conditioned conclusions that the Negro struggle, whatever its forms, has taken the path of the struggle for direct assimilation. All that we can add to this is that these goals cannot be accomplished except through the socialist revolution.

But there are circumstances under which this movement is forced to take a different turn. In this connection it is quite clear that Comrade Breitman completely misunderstands my attitude. When he says that I would consider a separatist type of development of the Negro struggle to be a calamity, he puts the cart before the horse in the rather important matter of the relation between cause and effect.

Negro separatism would not of itself be a catastrophe, but it could only result from a tremendous social catastrophe. One which would be of sufficient depth to alter the entire relationship of forces which has been built up as the result of the development of the modern Negro movement and the creation of the CIO. Only once during the past 130 years have the Negro masses intimated in any way that they might take the road of separatism. This was the result of a social catastrophe: the defeat of the Negroes in the Reconstruction. This defeat pushed them back into such a terrible isolation and demoralization, that there was no channel for the movement to express its traditional demand for equality. The result was the Garvey movement. This occurred, and could have occurred, only in the deepest isolation and confusion of the Negro masses. The real meaning of the Garvey movement is that it provided a transition from the abject defeat of the Negroes to the renewal of their traditional struggle for direct equality. It did not at all signify a fundamental nationalism.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that there were sufficient elements of genuine separatism in the Garvey movement to have taken it in a different direction that it actually went, under different circumstances. Consequently, it cannot be excluded, with a re-appearance of similar conditions which brought on the Garvey movement, under different historical circumstances, the separatist tendency might become stronger and even dominant, and the historical

tendency of the struggle might change its direction. I would view it as a potentially great revolutionary movement against capitalism and welcome and support it as such. But no more "revolutionary" than the present tendency toward direct assimilation.

It is important to note here the following comparison between the Negro movement in the United States and the oppressed nations of Europe. The Negro movement expresses separation at the time of its greatest backwardness, defeat and isolation. The oppressed nations express separatism only under the favorable conditions of revolution, solidarity and enlightenment.

We must now return to the specific circumstances which were mentioned by Trotsky as being conducive to the possible development of Negro separatism, to my interpretation of them and to Comrade Breitman's remarks about my interpretation.

First in regard to the "Japanese invasion." Comrade Breitman, a fairly literal minded comrade himself, objects to my literal interpretation of Trotsky's reference to the possibility of a Japanese invasion being a possible condition for the emergence of Negro separatism.

Now in the text ("a rough stenogram uncorrected by the participants") there is no interpretation of this proposition. At no other place in either the published discussion or in any writing does Trotsky allude to it again. We are left with the necessity of interpreting it as is most logical and most consistent with the context in which it appears.

I am firmly persuaded that it is necessary to stick very closely to a literal construction of what Trotsky said here in order to retain his meaning, or at least that meaning which appears to me to be self-evident.

Trotsky said, "If Japan invades the United States." He did not say, "If the United States embarks upon war with Japan." Or, "If the United States wars on China." As a matter of fact the U.S. had a long war with the Japanese, an imperialist nation, and another long war with the North Koreans, a revolutionary people. Neither of these wars created any conditions which stimulated Negro separatism. But this wasn't what Trotsky was talking about. He said, "If Japan invades the United States." And he must have meant just that. He didn't mean an attack on the Hawaiian Islands, or the occupation of the Philippines, but an invasion of the continental United States in which large or small areas of the U.S. would come under the domination of an Asian imperialist power, which, however, is classified by the United States as an "inferior race."

Such a circumstance would cause a severe shock to the whole racial structure of American society. And out of this shock might conceivably come Negro separatism. For in the beginning of a Japanese occupation, it seems highly probable that the Negroes would receive preferential treatment by the Japanese, at least to the

extent of being granted equality. But this would be the equality of subjection to a foreign invader. The contradiction which this kind of situation would put the Negro people in is the circumstance which Trotsky saw as containing the possibility of developing Negro separatism.

Comrade Breitman's proposal that an invasion of China by the U.S. might bring forth similar results is very wrong. If the Negro people began to develop a reluctance to fight against China under the conditions of a protracted war against China, they would not develop separatist tendencies. They would combine with the more class conscious white workers who felt the same way about it and develop a vital agitation leading the mass action of the workers and all the oppressed against the war.

But it is significant that Comrade Breitman immediately postulated Negro separatism as the most probable expression of their opposition to war. This derives from his nationalist conception of the Negro question. If we could agree that Trotsky's analysis of the problem of nationalities in the Russian Revolution was the key to the understanding of the Negro question I would be more sympathetic to Comrade Breitman's tendency to see Negro separatism as the possible result of every minor change in the objective conditions of the class struggle. As it is I cannot go along with it.

Next comes the question of fascism. And again, I am inclined to rather literal construction of Trotsky's statement, for the reason that it is the only one which corresponds to the actual possibilities. Trotsky said that if fascism should be victorious, a new condition would be created which might bring about Negro racial separatism. He wasn't alluding to the temporary victories which might appear during the course of a long struggle against it. He specifically included a new and different national "condition" in race relations: a new privileged condition for the white workers at the expense of the Negroes, and the consequent alienation of the Negro struggle from that of the working class as a whole.

I maintain that until the complete victory of fascism the basic relation between the Negro struggle and the working class struggle will remain unaltered and even in partial and episodic defeats will tend to grow stronger; that there will be no groundwork for the erection of a fundamentally separatist movement as long as the present basic relation between the Negro struggle and the working class struggle remains as it is.

Comrade Breitman says on page 13, "And in that case (an extended struggle against fascism) may a fascist victory not be possible in the southern states, resulting in an intensification of racial delirium and oppression beyond anything yet known." And may this not bring about a separatist development?

His contention obviously is that a victory of fascism in the South would result in something qualitatively different than exists there today. But what is at stake here is not the question

of self-determination, but our conception of the southern social system. Comrade Breitman obviously disagrees with my analysis of the South or he could not possibly make such an assertion.

I have characterized the basic regime in the South since the end of Reconstruction as fascist-like; i.e., "herein is revealed the sociological and historical antecedent of German fascism." Further, a fascist-like regime which has now degenerated into a police dictatorship.

The present rulers of the South were raised to power by the Klan, a middleclass movement of racial terrorism. This movement was controlled not by the middle class, but by the capitalist class and the plantation owners. It achieved the elimination of both the Negro movement and the labor movement from the South for an extended period of time. It was the result of a defeated and aborted revolution. It crushed bourgeois democracy and eliminated the working class, and the small farmers from any participation in government. It resulted in a totalitarian type regime. It resulted in a destruction of the living standards of the masses of people, both white and black, both workers and farmers.

Since the triumph of the Klan in the 1890's which signified the triumph of a fascist-type regime, there has been no qualitative change in political relations. As the mass middle class base of the Klan was dissipated by the evolution of capitalism, the regime degenerated into a military dictatorship, which is the condition of the South today.

It has been difficult to arrive at a precise and scientific designation of the southern social system. When I say "fascist-like" it not only implies identity but difference. There are the following differences.

First, that the southern social system was established not in the period of capitalist decline but in the period of capitalist rise. The most important consequence of this difference has been that the middle class base of southern fascism was able to achieve substantial benefits from their servitude to the plantation owners and capitalists in their function as agents of the oppression of the Negroes and the workers generally. The persecution of the Jews by the German middle class got them nothing but their own degradation. As capitalist decline sets in the South, the middle class base of the southern system begins to lose its social weight and many of the benefits it originally derived from the system.

Second, the southern system occurred in an agrarian economy, whereas, fascism in Europe was a phenomenon of the advanced industrial countries. In the more backward agrarian countries of Europe and Asia, where the peasantry is the main numerical force which threatens capitalism, it has not been necessary to resort to the development of a fascist movement in order to achieve counter-revolution. In the Balkan countries, a military counter-revolution was sufficient to subdue the peasantry in the revolutionary years following the Russian revolution.

The counter-revolution in the United States agrarian South during the Reconstruction required the development of a fascist-like movement long before its necessity was felt elsewhere. This was because chattel slaves are more like modern proletarians than like peasants.

The weakness of the peasantry as a class has been their petty-bourgeois character as tillers of small plots of soil to which they are attached. This has dispersed them, and made it difficult and indeed impossible for the peasantry to form a unified and homogeneous movement.

The chattel slave, the product of an ancient mode of production, has no land, no property, no nothing. He differs from the modern wage slave only in that he does not even have his own labor to sell for he doesn't even own his body. In addition to this, unlike the peasantry, slaves are worked in large numbers, and in the western hemisphere, under conditions of large scale commercial agriculture.

This proletarian quality of the slave has resulted in the creation of movements of considerably greater homogeneity and vitality than were possible for the peasantry of Europe. Capitalism was made aware of this in both Haiti and in the U.S. Reconstruction.

The third difference between the southern system in the U.S. and European fascism is that the southern system was a regional rather than a national system. It was always surrounded by a more or less hostile social environment within the framework of a single country. It did not have national sovereignty. So even though the southern bourbons have held control of some of the most important objects of state power in the United States for many decades and have attempted to spread their social system nationally in every conceivable manner, that they have not been successful has been a source of constant pressure upon the whole social structure of the South. The great advances which the Negro movement of the South have made of recent years occur under conditions of the degeneration of the southern system. The limitations of these same advances are, however, that the basic regime established by the Klan remains intact.

A new fascist upsurge in the South would worsen the conditions of the Negroes only in degree, not qualitatively. Comrade Breitman's position is that there would be a qualitative difference. It seems to me that it is necessary to cope with this question fundamentally, rather than exclusively with its secondary manifestations.

There is another false conclusion inherent in Comrade Breitman's series of assumptions. A victory of neo-fascism in the South would have no fundamental effect upon the basic course of the Negro movement. For although the Negro movement is not "national" in the sense that Comrade Breitman refers to it, it is certainly national in scope; it is a single homogeneous movement throughout the country.

This was true in 1830 and it is true today. In the era before the Civil War, the movement of the slaves could take no open or legal character in the South. The northern Negro movement was the open expression of the slaves' struggle. But it also provided the fundamental leadership and program for the movement of the slaves.

A similar relation between the various geographical sections of the Negro movement exists today. This relationship is modified, however, by the fact that the specific weight of the Negro struggle outside the South is greater than it was a century ago, by virtue of the large concentration of Negroes in the northern and western cities.

6. The Question of the Independent Organization of Negroes

Comrade Breitman has asked me to express myself more clearly and fully on the vital aspect of the Negro question relating to the "independent activities" of the Negro movement.

Very well. I advocate the unqualified support of the independent organizational expressions of the Negro struggle. I consider that the various manifestations of the independent character of the Negro struggle represent an absolutely essential arena of our work. This applies to the all-Negro organizations, as well as others.

I have a different evaluation of the quality of the independent Negro movement than does Comrade Breitman. I see the independence of the movement as expressing the fundamental aspirations of the Negro people in a contradictory manner; separate organization is the form in which the demand for assimilation is found. This results from the contradictory character of race relations in the U.S. White supremacy is created and maintained by the independent and exclusive organization of whites. Negroes are, therefore, forced into racial organization of their own in order to conduct a struggle against the race system.

On this question of the independent character of the Negro struggle Comrade Breitman is preoccupied with the form of the struggle. He tends to confuse the question of independence of form with independence as a direction of social motion. He implies constantly and even states that by virtue of independent form, its direction of motion may become towards social independence.

Although he has reluctantly acknowledged that we must also deal with something other than form, Comrade Breitman's complete preoccupation with it has committed him to disregard all of the fundamental economic, cultural, geographical, and historical factors, the difference in consciousness and direction of motion, the difference in origin and development, all of which set the Negro question apart from the national question in Europe. Because of the one factor of independence of form of the struggle which bears a slight similarity to the movements of oppressed nations of eastern Europe;

the Negro struggle is to him, therefore, national in character and will (or may) be stimulated toward separatism by similar circumstances which produced the demand for self-determination of the national minorities of Europe.

7. Self-determination and the White Workers

One of the signs of the vanguard character of the Negro struggle in its relation to the struggle of the working class against capitalism is the greater class consciousness of Negro workers as compared to the white working class.

This class consciousness derives from race consciousness and is rooted in the very nature of the Negro question. One of the main factors which prevents the development of class consciousness in the American working class is race prejudice. Specifically: white chauvinism.

The division of American society into races cuts across the working class. The white monopoly in skilled crafts created an aristocracy of labor corresponding to the racial division of society in general. The working class generally accepted the idea that they secure an economic advantage from the subordinate position of Negroes in the working class.

But as the role of the skilled crafts diminishes in modern industry, the possibility of maintaining an aristocratic division in the working class is revealed as a weapon against the working class as a whole, dividing it and preventing unified class action against capitalism.

Class consciousness and race prejudice do not mix. Rather one excludes the other. It is only the revolutionary socialists and the Negroes who are the implacable and conscious foes of race prejudice.

Segregation is the foundation of prejudice. The Negroes, in their struggle against segregation are constantly clearing the ground for the emergence of class consciousness in the working class as a whole.

It is the historical role of the Negro struggle to break down race prejudice in the working class and thereby to lead white workers toward class consciousness.

If the Negro struggle should change its course and strike out for racial independence, it would deprive the working class of its most class conscious, and advanced segments. Such a development would probably doom the American working class to a long continuation of its present political backwardness.

Under these conditions, Negro separatism would be reactionary and we would fight it mercilessly along with the militant Negroes.

The movement for the 49th State was precisely such a reactionary movement. It was promoted by middle class Negroes at the very time when Negro workers were at last in a position to see the possibility of joint struggle with the white workers against the employers in the great struggles of the 1930's. This movement was rightly condemned by the militant Negroes associated with the working class movement and with the N.A.A.C.P.

At the present moment, the rise to prominence of many Negro segregated educational institutions is calculated to be a counterweight to the struggle against segregation in the schools.

As the American working class reaches the very threshold of class consciousness and is on the verge of overcoming race prejudice sufficiently to take a fundamental step in consciously organizing itself as a class; at this time there will unquestionably be a revival of Negro separatism. It will be a last-ditch attempt on the part of the capitalist class to prevent working class solidarity and we will fight it.

It is not difficult under present conditions to convince even backward white workers of the idea of the right of Negroes to self-determination. This is because it corresponds to their race prejudice. It is precisely the backwardness of the white working class and the tradition of segregation which make the idea of self-determination for the Negroes more palatable and "realistic" to prejudiced white workers than the idea of immediate and unconditional equality.

This factor is another reason that Negroes tend to be hostile to the idea of their self-determination. It also reveals another important distinction between the national question as expressed in the Russian Revolution and the race question in the U.S. In the struggle against Russian capitalism, the slogan of self-determination for the oppressed minorities was the key to the liberation of the Russian workers from Great Russian chauvinism.

But it is different with racial chauvinism. The foundation of racial exploitation is not forced assimilation but segregation. White chauvinism expresses essentially the ideology of segregation. By virtue of the fact that segregation is part of the implied foundation of the idea of Negro self-determination, it tends to confirm white workers in their chauvinistic backwardness.

7. On the Nature of the Slogan of Self-Determination

The idea of self-determination of the oppressed minorities of Europe has played a decisive role in the unfolding of the revolution there since 1917. What is the actual content of this idea?

First of all, of and by itself, it decides nothing for an oppressed minority except to open up the question of free choice in deciding the fundamental questions. The economic and political development of Great Russia required the subordination of petty states and principalities to the national needs, as in the unifica-

tion of France and Britain. But the belated and uneven development of Russia combined the development of a single nation, Great Russia, with its imperialist oppression of subject peoples.

This expression of uneven development was typical of eastern Europe in general. And in many cases the pressure for assimilation into the dominant nation was strong enough, and the national aspirations of the oppressed minorities sufficiently subdued to inject an element of doubt as to the fundamental historical mode of direction of these peoples.

The revolutionary party cannot appear before such oppressed minorities as dictating to them that they must aspire to independence. By means of the slogan of self-determination, the Bolsheviks invited the oppressed minorities to undertake a struggle for national independence and promised them support if they should so decide.

Therefore, the slogan for self-determination is a transitional slogan; a transition to national consciousness.

What is to be determined? In the first place it is not one of two things which are involved at this stage. It is not a matter of determining either assimilation or independence. For an oppressed nation does not struggle for assimilation. It merely ceases to be a nationality and assimilates. Such a nation does not determine that it will do this, but is just absorbed into the dominant nation.

The only thing to be determined is whether to undertake a struggle for national independence.

The second phase of the question of self-determination occurs when national consciousness is already established and a nation begins to emerge. In the Russian Revolution the oppressed nationalities established the conditions of their future assimilation into the USSR under the Bolshevik principle of self-determination. The question to be determined at this stage was whether the formerly oppressed nations of Czarism should give up a portion of their national sovereignty and federate into the USSR, or to assert complete independence. Either of these choices is, of course, merely the condition by which these people will eventually assimilate into world socialism which will be without national boundary lines.

Among the colonial peoples the slogan of self-determination has little if any meaning or application. Their struggles are from the beginning far advanced in comparison to the small nations of Europe. They have already determined not only that they are nations but also that they want and require complete independence from the oppressing imperialist country.

Furthermore, the nationalism of most colonial peoples is not generally questioned by the oppressor so long as it does not express the desire for independence. Britain never attempted to "assimilate" the Indians, as Russia did the Ukrainians. On the con-

trary the strictest division between the European and "native" cultures was always maintained as a necessary condition of the rule of the British.

The Chinese never felt the need for this kind of transitional slogan to awaken their resentment of colonial oppression or their desire to be independent of it.

Neither the Colonial Theses of the Second Congress of the Comintern, nor the theses on the Far East of the First Congress of the Fourth International give any indication that the question of self-determination plays a role in the struggle of the colonial peoples against imperialism. Theirs is a direct struggle for independence which doesn't require this transitional vehicle. The strategic problem for the revolutionary party is considered to be to create a class differentiation in the national struggle whereby the proletariat may be able to give leadership to it.

8. The Negroes and the Question of Self-Determination

I have admitted a certain limited historical possibility in which the Negro movement might take a separatist course. Such as after the complete triumph of fascism in the U.S.

I believe that even under such circumstances the separatist movement of Negroes would probably have the same function that the Garvey movement had in its day: to provide a transition to the open struggle for direct assimilation.

But even in this circumstance, the fundamental difficulty reappears. For the slogan of self-determination was designed for the national question in Europe, and the Negro question in the U.S. is different in kind.

If the necessities of the struggle against capitalism required the Negroes to aspire or strive for racial separation it would probably be quite as obvious as the desire for national independence of the colonial peoples. In this case the slogan of self-determination would be just as meaningless as it is today for both the colonial peoples and the Negroes in the U.S.

Negroes in the United States do not have national consciousness. This is not because they are politically backward as the Stalinists claim and as Comrade Breitman implies, but because there is no economic groundwork upon which they might build a national consciousness.

They do, however, possess race consciousness. Race consciousness is primarily the Negroes' consciousness of equality and their willingness to struggle for its vindication. This consciousness is the political equivalent of the national consciousness of oppressed nations and of the class consciousness of the working class. It is equivalent in that it provides an adequate groundwork for the solution of the question of racial discrimination.

Among the oppressed nations and classes of the world, both national and class consciousness can be fulfilled in the present epoch only through the socialist revolution. This is also true of Negro race consciousness.

What is the problem of consciousness among Negroes? Some Negroes are not conscious of their right to equality. They are victims of the pressure of white supremacy and through the B.T. Washington influence accept the social status of inequality as right and proper. They must strive to be the equivalent of whites by the standards of white supremacy.

The individual, left to his or her own resources must work out a servile solution to his or her individual problem. The social objective which is contained in this theory is the possibility of a separate but subordinate society for Negroes modeled after the social system of the South.

This is another reason that Negroes react with hostility to the program of Negro separatism: it is very well known to them as containing racial subordination.

Our strategical problem is to overcome the absence of race consciousness. Or, putting it another way: to find a transition to race consciousness.

To propose to the mass workers and Negroes the idea of self-determination would be wrong. For the decisive fact in the acceptance of white supremacy is the acceptance of segregation. The slogan of self-determination requires the desire for segregation as its foundation. Upon this foundation national consciousness is built.

In this manner the idea of self-determination cuts across the path of our strategic problem because it encourages the acceptance of segregation; and this is the case whether it is advanced as a slogan or merely held in abeyance in our theoretical analysis.

Comrade Breitman's support of the idea of self-determination estranges him from the Negro movement on two counts. First, in relation to the mass of Negroes who have attained race consciousness. These Negroes are above the level of consciousness which requires the kind of transition which is represented in the slogan of self-determination. He proposes that the revolution will (or may) return the Negroes to a stage of ignorance and backwardness in which this elementary type of transitional slogan will correspond with their lack of consciousness.

Second, this idea contributes nothing to the consciousness of the more backward Negroes except to confirm their backwardness.

9. The Question of Method

The question of method has become involved in the discussion primarily with Comrade Breitman's preoccupation with form.

There are several other aspects of his thinking which require scrutiny from this point of view. The first of these is the tentative character of all or most of his conclusions. This is illustrated by the astonishing circumstance that some of his most important conclusions are contained in parenthetical expressions.

This has been a considerable irritation to me in replying to him: how difficult it is to break through a parenthesis to make a polemic! But in reality this does him no discredit. For this is evidently his means of saying that although he reacts with hostility to my point of view he is not prepared to propose his own in as categorical a manner as I have mine.

He has thereby left important question marks over his own point of view. I consider this a contribution to the tone of the discussion which will help to prevent the crystallization of opinion before the discussion is in a more advanced stage.

Nevertheless, I must call attention to these question marks. I have advanced a fundamental proposition of the two poles of the Negro movement being separatism and assimilation. There is nothing more fundamental to the nature of a question than its internal polar opposition. Yet Comrade Breitman, while he disagrees with my statement of this polar opposition, has only this to say: "(Such over-simplification would be unnecessary with another conception, here advanced tentatively:.....)"

On page 12. "We do not know the precise historical direction the Negro movement will take." Now it is not up to us to determine in advance all the tactical variants through which a movement must go in order to fulfill its destiny. But "...the precise historical direction" is the one thing that we are supposed to know. As a matter of fact that is the one thing which has given us the responsibility of the whole future of mankind: that we know the precise historical direction of every social movement which pertains to the international social revolution against capitalism, and the political revolution against the Soviet bureaucracy. If we do not know what the precise historical direction of motion of the Negro struggle is, it is high time we found out, for that is our fundamental concern.

On page 19, he says, in the same vein, "But if the Negro masses, for whatever reason and despite our advice, should determine that they can't get or don't want equality through integration"etc. This particular question mark which Comrade Breitman puts over his own convictions is part of his mystical attachment to Negro nationalism. For he somehow knows that the Negro people will ("possibly") demand a separate state, but he cannot give any reason for it. Therefore he must include in his program, "But if the Negroes, for whatever reason" want to develop a separate society we should support them.

Yet another characteristic of Comrade Breitman's article is argument by implication.

Take for instance his handling of the Garvey movement. I

have analyzed this movement on two separate occasions. Comrade Breitman apparently disagrees with this analysis. He says that I dismiss the question too lightly and am wrong in identifying Garvey with Booker T. Washington.

He doesn't like my analysis. But what is his? He doesn't give any.

Now it is just possible that he believes that my argument and analysis are completely vanquished by his few reproving words. That would indicate that he doesn't consider it necessary to restate an argument which is already conclusively proved. That is, he argues here by implication. As elsewhere in the article, he relies upon traditional conceptions to argue for him. But these are precisely the conceptions which I have challenged, and very specifically, too.

It may be that there are others who, like Comrade Breitman consider the traditional conception of questions to be sufficient evidence of their correctness, by virtue of their traditional existence. But Comrade Breitman sets himself the task of convincing me and the whole party of the errors of my point of view. This requires more than an implied argument.

10. Self-Determination and Stalinism

I believe that I have referred before to the astonishing fact that our resolution on the Negro question is probably unique in all the political resolutions of the party in that it doesn't even mention Stalinism.

The Stalinists rank very high among our political enemies. They are, at least, our most serious competitors for the allegiance of the radical Negroes. Yet we have never published a criticism of their program for Negroes.

The only possible inference which could be drawn from this circumstance is that we have no programmatic or theoretical criticism of the Stalinists. Comrade Breitman justifies this inference in his proposition that our difference with the Stalinists is a tactical and propaganda difference: that they defend the right of the Negroes to self-determination in a vulgar and bureaucratic manner.

Comrade Breitman's frivolous description, on page 16, of what the Stalinist position on the Negro question is, does the Stalinists a great injustice. For the groundwork of the Stalinist conception of the Negro question is the nationalist conception of the Negro question. And this is Comrade Breitman's fundamental ground.

The main difference between the position of Comrade Breitman and that of the Stalinists is that where he is tentative, they are sure; where he is vague, they are clear; where Comrade Breitman says that the Negroes may develop separatist tendencies, the

Stalinists say that the Negroes will.

Comrade Breitman designates the Negroes as a nation, not directly, but by his reference to the identity of the Negro struggle and the problem of the "non-classical" nationalities of the Russian revolution. The Stalinists say that the Negroes are a nation because they fulfill all of the economic and cultural conditions which are the basis of nationalism.

Comrade Breitman suggests that I would be a poor one to clarify and explain how our defense of the Negroes' right to self-determination differs from the Stalinists'. And he is quite right. For I do not believe that the question of self-determination is at stake in the Negro struggle. The concept of self-determination is a reactionary idea which cuts across the historical line of development of the struggle, confusing its nature, its aims and objectives.

I have upon several occasions alluded to the hostility with which many militant Negroes regard the theory of Negro self-determination. But it is quite true that the Communist Party has a considerable Negro cadre, and upon occasion this has been pointed out as a contradiction to my contention of the attitude of Negroes toward the question of their self-determination.

This is, to be sure, a militant group of Negroes, and if they are not devoted to the idea of self-determination, they are at least tolerant of it to the extent that they are willing to live in a party which holds this idea in theoretical abeyance.

But the idea of self-determination for Negroes in the U.S. is no more fantastic than the theory of socialism in one country and all the political fantasies which flow from it. When a person of any race or nationality whatever, becomes so corrupted in thinking as to be able to accept the fundamental political line of Stalinism, it should not be too hard to accept the idea of self-determination for American Negroes, even as expounded by the Stalinists.

There is another side to the problem of Stalinism. The Stalinist party goes through a regular cyclical crisis over the question of race prejudice. Periods of theoretical reaffirmation of the theory of Negro self-determination alternate with purges and campaigns against white chauvinism.

This hectic internal life around the race question, is caused primarily by the fact that the basic theory of the Stalinists on the Negro struggle does nothing to liberate white workers from prejudice, but on the other hand corresponds to their backwardness and tends to confirm them in it.

Our criticism of Stalinism must be a fundamental one. For I conceive it to be our task as far as theory is concerned to vindicate in every conceivable manner and in all phases, the Negro struggle for equality. The confusion of the Negro question with the national question in Europe and the colonial question serves only

to obscure the real nature of this struggle and constitutes a qualification, or limitation to the validity of the real Negro struggle.

Summary

1. The Negro question in the United States is not a national but is the question of racial discrimination.
2. I disagree with the proposition that the study of the national question in the Russian revolution gives specific illumination to the Negro question in the United States, except in that it reveals a qualitative difference between them.
3. Essentially, only the complete victory of fascism in the U.S. could transform the movement for direct assimilation through immediate equality into one of racial independence.
4. The dual nature of the Negro struggle arises from that fact that a whole people regardless of class distinction are the victims of discrimination. This problem of a whole people can be solved only through the proletarian revolution, under the leadership of the working class. The Negro struggle is therefore not the same as the class struggle, but in its independent character is allied to the working class. Because of the independent form of the Negro movement, it does not thereby become a national or separatist struggle, but draws its laws of development from its character as a racial struggle against segregation and discrimination.
5. The question of self-determination is not the question which is at stake in the Negro struggle.
6. We have in our resolution and in the party consciousness on the Negro question, as expressed by Comrade Breitman, a conception of Negro nationalism and the importance of the idea of Negro self-determination. I believe that this should be combatted and eliminated. First, because it is dialectically incorrect. Second, because most Negroes are hostile to it on a completely progressive basis. Third, because it teaches white workers nothing but tends to confirm them in their traditional race prejudice.

In conclusion, I wish to thank Comrade Breitman for his reply, which in its own way was straight-forward and more revealing than I had anticipated. I hope that he will not consider that it has revealed more to me than is justified by its content or by direct implication.

Los Angeles
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