

# On the Negro Question (A Discussion)

Los Angeles

Popular impressions to the contrary, the concept of a Negro nation in the U.S. did not originate with the Communists. It has been given expression by Negro spokesmen before the Civil War and since. Martin Delany, for example, wrote in 1852: "We are a nation within a nation:—as the Poles in Russia, the Hungarians in Austria, the Welsh, Irish and Scotch in the British Dominions." (*A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, edited by Herbert Aptheker, pp. 326-27).

Nor did Communists invent the national question. The national question had its origin in the rise of capitalism. In his masterly exposition of the national and Colonial Question—Stalin pointed out: "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 was at the same time a process of amalgamation of people into nations. . . ." (.13)

Marxian contribution to the national question lies, in part, in the clarity given it by Lenin and Stalin, the unequivocal manner in which they presented and applied it, and their extension of the principle of self-determination to include not only the oppressed and dependent white nationalities of Europe, but the non-white peoples of the world as well. In this they took sharp issue with the social-imperialists in the Second International

who considered the right of self-determination to be applicable only to the Irish, Poles, Czechs and other white nationalities. As Stalin remarks:

" . . . In the era of the Second International it was usual to confine the national question to a narrow circle of questions relating exclusively to the "civilized nations." . . . The tens and hundreds of millions of the Asiatic and African peoples suffering from national oppression in its crudest and most brutal form did not as a rule enter the field of vision of the 'Socialists.' The latter did not venture to place the white peoples and colored peoples, the 'uncultured' Negroes and the 'civilized' Irish, the 'backward' Indians and the 'enlightened' Poles on one and the same footing. . . ." (*Ibid*, p. 111.)

The projection in 1928 of our theoretical position on the Negro Question in the U.S. in which we characterized as an oppressed nation the historic Negro majorities in the Black Belt, evoked the berserk rage of Southern planters and other beneficiaries of the jimcrow system. Quick to recognize the revolutionary content of our position, these circles unleashed a furious and sustained attack on our Party, which continues to this day. In this they were valiantly aided by Negro reformists who obligingly distorted our position as advocacy of wholesale segregation of the Negro people in a jimcrow state—a grotesque proposal previously advanced, in the 49th State movement, by Negro reformists themselves.

Our Party, which stood firmly by its position throughout the turbulent 'thirties, began a retreat from that posi-

tion in the early 'forties under the influence of Browder revisionism. This retreat culminated in 1956 in the amazing pronouncement by Comrade Dennis (*Political Affairs* for May) that, without consultation with the membership, our position had been "modified—in fact dropped."

In now throwing open the question for discussion, the National Committee is to be commended. It is to be hoped it will encourage a thorough-going discussion on this important and complex question and combat any tendency to impose a decision from above. Should the latter occur, the suspicion would be unavoidable that the reopening of the question was merely intended to legalize the arbitrary and undemocratic 1956 action of the national leadership.

The Draft Resolution now before the Party, as well as the article by Comrade Jim Jackson ("New Features of the Negro Question in the United States") on which it is based, both published in the Jan. 1958 issue of *Political Affairs*, bluntly declare that our Party was in error in characterizing the Black Belt Negro majorities as a nation. This conclusion of original sin is, according to the Draft Resolution, "compelled" by "a major alteration in the geographical distribution of the Negro people," occurring, if you please, several decades after we adopted our position of the Negro people as a nation; plus, of all things, the Negro people's "common psychological make-up" miraculously metamorphosed into "the main currents" of the "thought and leadership" of the Negro bourgeoisie "in the struggle for advancement and freedom."

Thus the shifts of Negro population

and the "thought and leadership" of a bourgeoisie notorious for its consistent efforts to direct the Negro movement into reformist channels, harmless to the oppressors, are presented as "compulsive" factors at variance with the Marxist-Leninist definition of a nation:

"A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and *psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture.*" (Stalin, *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*, p. 8. Emphasis added.)

How valid is the "compulsive" conclusion, based upon these two alleged "variants," that there is no Negro nation in the Black Belt? It is, of course, undeniable that for several decades now there has been in process a mass flight of Negroes from the terror-ridden Black Belt to urban centers, North and South. But does this mean there are no longer any significant Negro majorities in this historic area of Negro concentration? This question is answered in the negative by Comrade Jackson himself who, in *Political Affairs* for October 1958, noted that between 1940 and 1950 there was a reduction from 180 to 170 of the Black Belt counties of absolute Negro majority. (Other figures give the decline as from 180 to 156.) But is a loss of ten counties, or even of twenty-four, so decisive as to constitute a "compulsive" factor for revising our theoretical position of a Negro nation? And do Marxists limit the Black Belt area to majority counties, anyway? Or do we take into account the gerrymandering devices by which Negro majorities are often wiped out, as in the recent carving up of Macon County, Alabama,

among three neighboring counties?

Under Proposition 2, and subheaded "the element of common psychological make-up," the Draft Resolution declares:

"Taking into full account all that is distinctive in this feature of the nation-like development of the Negro people, nevertheless, this is not determinative for either the solution or representation of the Negro question in the United States. The main currents of Negro thought and leadership in the struggle for advancement and freedom, historically, and universally at the present time, have projected their programs from the premise that Negroes individually and as a people are no less Americans than any other claimants. Only in describing the dimensions of their oppression have the Negro people represented themselves as a people apart from the American nation."

Such a basically one-sided analysis of the Negro movement is not only undialectic but patently false and distorted. There never has been, and is not today, any universal acceptance by the Negro people of the program of the Negro bourgeoisie, as here implied; nor any generation of Negroes in which the concept of Negro nationhood has not been raised, if frequently in unscientific terms. It was raised, for example, by the Garvey movement, largest Negro mass movement in the history of the country, by the 49th State movement, etc. It is today a part of the program of the burgeoning Negro Moslem Movement, with its rabid creed of hatred of *all* whites.

And almost a decade before the Party adopted its position of the Negro people as a nation, the slogan "Self-determination for the Negro Majorities in the Black Belt" had been put forward by the Left-wing African

Blood Brotherhood in an elaboration of the demand for Negro self-determination raised by this writer in editorials in *The Amsterdam News* in 1915, 1916 and 1917.

In advancing the "compulsive" conclusion that the Negro people are not a nation and have no claim on the right of self-determination, the Jackson article and draft resolution commit the not unfamiliar error of contraposing two definite trends in the Negro movement: 1. the historic resistance of the Negro people to jimcrow oppression and their fight for full equality in the American scheme; 2. the welding together of the Negro people and the development of their national consciousness in the process of that fight.

It is mainly on the first trend (and rejection of the second) that Jackson bases his contention that there is not now *nor ever was* a Negro nation in the Black Belt. His voluminous data on population shifts, long-range economic changes (i.e., gradualism) etc., are merely incidental material to his thesis that the Negro people "*are a historically determined component part of the American nation in the United States,*" which "*is a historically derived national formation, an amalgam of more or less well differentiated nationalities.*"

To him the "Melting Pot" concept and the Negro people's fight for full equality automatically cancel out the concept of a Negro nation. One wonders what would be his conclusion had the Negro people accepted passively the atrocious conditions imposed upon them? Would the absence of resistance have given validity to the concept of a Negro nation?

Certainly the demand for self-deter-

mination, for the right of the Negro people to determine their destiny, is not in contradiction to the proposition that Negroes fight for the fullest rights as Americans. These two currents in the Negro movement supplement each other and constitute a harmonious whole.

And what is the alternative to our position offered by Comrade Jackson? The old-Social Democratic argument that Negroes are workers, period; i.e., they have no problems apart from the general problems of the working class. They are, he says, "an oppressed urban working people." And into this category he lumps both the Negroes in the South and those in the North and West, in bland disregard of the far more terrible and all-sided nature of Negro oppression in the South.

The Negro people, he admits, "retain special national features and nation-like characteristics which manifest themselves (among other ways) in a universal conception and consciousness of their identity as a distinctive people. . . ." But he makes the admission only to brush it aside. It is, for him, not "the decisive determinative." He writes that "The national question exists in an infinite variety of forms and Marxist science provides guide lines for the theoretical representation and solution of each particular manifestation and formation of the national question." But, except for the wholly irrelevant quotation from Marx that "mankind sets for itself only those tasks it can achieve," Jackson offers not a single Marxist guide line to buttress the position expressed both in his article and draft resolution that resistance by a people to national oppression, and that people's fight for full

equality, negate their status as an oppressed nation and their right to self-determination, in whatever way they might desire to exercise that right.

All of which is highly reminiscent of Lenin's caustic criticism of the Polish Social-Democrats: "Objectively, the Polish comrades want to make Marxism 'more profound,' but they do it very awkwardly. . . ." (*Collected Works*, Vol. XIX, p. 273.)

The manner in which Comrade Jackson uses his out-of-context quotation from Marx to argue that the one course of development he sees in the Negro movement "is in conformation with the first law (sic) of Marxism that 'mankind sets for itself only those tasks it can achieve,'" is tantamount to saying that since certain basic democratic rights are impossible of attainment under capitalism, they should not be fought for. On that sort of reasoning, Lenin commented:

. . . the refusal to advocate the right of self-determination is equal to the worst opportunism. . . .

In fact, this narrow-mindedness is clutched at by the opportunists of all nations who fight shy of the ideas of 'storms' and 'leaps,' believe the bourgeois-democratic revolution is over, and reach out for the liberalism of the Kokoshkins. (*Selected Works*, Vol. IV, p. 291.)

How well those "succeed" who blithely essay the task of making Marxism "more profound" was pointed up at the '46 Plenum by Comrade Jim Allen (himself today in this category):

". . . I always found that where someone who opposes our position of the Negro people as a nation, tried to present an alternative position to be in accordance with realities, to be scientific in its basis, tied up with current

issues and struggles of the people, he has not been able to do so in scientifically correct terms. He has had to fall back in his discussion of the Negro question only really outmoded concepts such as race or pure class or labor or castes. And what else is the meaning of national racial minority? Because as Marxists we certainly cannot accept a racial category as a point of departure." (*The Communist Position on the Negro Question*, p. 33).

That statement retains its validity today despite the fact that this same Comrade Allen later came up with the monstrosity that the Negro people are "an oppressed racial-national minority, or," he added, "as Comrade Jackson puts it a racially distinct oppressed nationality." (Allen, "Some New Data Toward Understanding the Position of Negroes in the U.S. Today." *National Discussion Bulletin* No. 2, Fall of 1956).

In neither article nor draft resolution does Comrade Jackson consider the impact on the Negro people of the rise of independent Negro nations in Africa, the emergence of China as a great power—the impact, in brief, of the mighty colonial national liberation revolution sweeping Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Yet can it be denied that these tremendous and inspiring events are influencing the thinking and outlook of the Negro people, and must inevitably accelerate the development of their national consciousness, particularly in view of the patent hostility of U.S. imperialism to the colonial peoples' freedom fight, and the present stalemate in the school desegregation fight, resulting from the "massive resistance" of the Dixiecrats, as reflected in terroristic acts and enactment of a slew of anti-Negro legislation, and the

unparalleled refusal of the federal government to enforce a mandate of the U.S. Supreme Court?

It is axiomatic that a Communist program on the Negro Question must meet the Marxist criterion as to whether that program has a clear anti-imperialist orientation and is not, in Lenin's words, confined "to agitation for changes which do not require the removal of the main foundations of the old ruling class, changes that are *compatible* with the *preservation* of these foundations." (*Selected Works*, Vol. IV, p. 145).

The basic weakness of the Negro liberation movement today is its limitation to the specific immediate demands, whereas what is needed is for us to raise the level of the movement, as the late Ed Strong pointed out at the '46 Plenum, to qualitatively higher levels—through an *active and equal* alliance with Organized Labor and other progressive groups in the country, together with the closest tie-up of the Negro movement with the colonial freedom movement. This can be accomplished only through truly revolutionary program on the Negro question which recognizes the Negro nation and advances the slogan of self-determination as a *potential* weapon to be seized by the Negro people when they are ready to use it.

That there is not now any broad popular awareness of nationhood among the Negro people is immaterial. Objective reality does not depend upon subjective recognition. And to say there is no broad popular awareness of nationhood is not saying there is no such awareness among growing sections of the Negro people.

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