

Racism and Black Oppression in the United States: A Beginning Analysis

by Paul Costello

America's central problem of the past eight decades, and indeed well before, has been the burden of race and class—the historical expropriation of labor power and the destruction of the cultural and social institutions of the people of African, Asian and Hispanic descent. The problem of the future, and the challenge of the present, is the final emancipation and liberation of this class, and the destruction of white racism and capitalism itself.

Manning Marable, *Blackwater*¹

Racism and black oppression—there are few issues as theoretically complex or politically important facing the US left today. Our ability to come up with appropriate analyses and an effective strategy to confront them will, in no small part, determine the future of the left in American society. We make no claim that this article provides either of those requirements. It is only one effort in a struggle which requires the broadest participation and the most serious attention. We hope that this article succeeds in presenting some of the more significant aspects of racism and black oppression in a new and provocative way. New in the sense that American Marxists have often failed to bring the latest theoretical advances of their science to bear on these issues. Provocative, in the way that we have used what we consider to be the most important of these advances to present a different perspective on racism and black oppression from what the Marxist-Leninist movement has traditionally provided.

This article is divided into three parts. The first is an outline economic history of black Americans beginning with the slave system and ending with the present economic crisis. Part two is concerned with the ideology of racism, considering it, first in the context of ideologies and ideological struggle and, then, in the context of its evolution in the specific conditions of the United States. The third part initiates a discussion of the more general aspects of the political struggle against racism, both as a broad social movement, and more specifically within the workingclass. An appendix concerning two aspects of the Black Nation Thesis follows Part III.

We look on this article as one step in a long process of study, struggle, verification and rectification. We welcome the comments and criticisms of our readers.

Part I: An Outline Economic History of Black Americans

The Slave System

If the history of American blacks must begin with Africa, the history of black *Americans* can properly be said to start with slavery and the slave system. The history of slavery in North America can be divided into two periods or phases.²

Phase I (17th to late 18th centuries) was characterized by the use of slaves, convicts and indentured laborers in the American colonies in the production of agricultural products primarily for local consumption and only secondarily and unevenly for trade and exchange. In this period slave labor coexisted alongside the labor of white settlers themselves.

Phase II (late 18th century to civil war) was characterized by the large scale production of cotton and other similar crops as commodities for sale on the world market to meet the demands of capitalist industrial production in Europe. Given these conditions slavery developed and expanded in response to the dynamic of the world capitalist economy and burgeoning industrialism.

What were the objective conditions which first led to the introduction of slavery and later to its expansion into the dominant form of production in the Southern states? The most prominent (their order not signifying their importance) were as follows: (a) the African slave trade and slavery as a legal institution preexisted the development of large scale production in the South and provided a ready supply of labor; (b) merchant's capital promoted slaves as commodities and the African slave trade was capable of more or less indefinite expansion, so that there were no limitations on the supply of slave labor; (c) convicts and indentured laborers from Europe could not be made available in sufficient numbers to meet the demand for labor and compensate for the losses caused by the high mortality rate; (d) there were no indigenous peoples in sufficient numbers suitable for conversion into an alternative labor

supply; (e) the soil and climate of the South was suited to the production of cotton, sugar, tobacco, and rice, crops which required large investments in labor and the combined working of large groups of laborers, unlike the grain production of the Northern states; (f) given the nature of this kind of crop production, capitalist farming based on free labor could not be imported into the South. Capitalist farming of such crops based on free labor is only possible where there is monopoly ownership of land. As long as land exists free for cultivation, as was provided by the frontier, laborers would tend to become independent farmers or artisans rather than work for other landowners.³

The effects of the industrial revolution in Europe, the demand for raw materials and the invention of the cotton gin combined to cause the transition from the first to the second phase of US slavery and the transformation of the South into a *specialized agrarian commodity producing region* providing raw materials to the more developed capitalist centers, particularly England. Production in this agrarian region took the form of a plantation system with the following basic features: (a) slave labor formed the basis of social production to the exclusion of any other; (b) the slaves labored in work gangs on large plantations and estates—they were separated from the means of production and not merely legally unfree direct producers; (c) slaves were bought and sold as commodities and as capital; (d) the product of slave labor was sold as a commodity.⁴

While few would disagree that these features accurately describe slavery, there has been considerable debate among Marxists and historians about the exact nature of the plantation system. Can it best be characterized as capitalist or was it in fact a form of the slave mode of production?

The Plantation System: Slavery or Capitalism?

The argument that American slavery was capitalist goes something like this. American slavery developed under conditions of expanding world capitalism and commodity production. The dynamic of capitalism manifests itself through the capitalist world market and commodity circulation which draws in and consumes all non-capitalist modes of production, transforming them into forms of commodity production, i.e., capitalism.⁵ Accordingly, since American slavery developed into commodity production for the world market, it must be considered to be capitalist in character.

There are several fatal flaws in this approach. First and foremost, it fails to understand Marx's definition of the capitalist mode of production. For Marx capitalism is not defined at the moment of circulation and commodity exchange, but at the point of production. Commerce, world trade and the production and circulation of commodities existed well before capitalism, and they by no means define the capitalist mode of production. A quote from Marx's *Capital* makes this point clear:

The historical conditions of its [capitalism's] existence are by no means given with the mere circulation of money and commodities. It can spring into life only when the owner of the means of production and subsistence meets in the market with the free laborer selling his labor power. And this one historical condition comprises a world's

history. Capital, therefore, announces from its first appearance a new epoch in the process of social production.⁶

Thus the fact that American slave production was commodity production, *by itself*, in no way makes slave production capitalist. Instead capitalism requires specific capitalist *production relations*: the existence of a free laborer selling his/her only commodity, labor power, in exchange for wages, to a capitalist who owns means of production. The notion that production for the capitalist world market equals capitalism confuses the question of whether labor is "performed *within* the world capitalist system with the question of whether it is performed *under capitalist production relations*." Put another way it fails to distinguish the *capitalist mode of production* from capitalism as a *world system* in which the capitalist mode is the *dominant*, but not the *exclusive* mode of production.⁷

The "modern slavery equals capitalism" view not only starts from an erroneous understanding of the nature of capitalism, but it also provides a false picture of the actual relationships possible between capitalism and other, non-capitalist modes of production. This question is not simply of academic interest. It is essential to those countries today which are still grappling with the transition to capitalism and various vestiges of non-capitalist modes and forms of production.⁸

It is true that the predominant tendency of capitalism is to dissolve other modes of production and to subsume their agents under capitalist relations of production. However, at the same time, this tendency is combined with another, secondary one, a tendency to restructure and, at the same time, conserve other non-capitalist modes and forms of production. This latter tendency is secondary as far as capitalism as a whole is concerned, but it has been the *dominant* tendency at certain times in certain places in the history of capitalism. This has particularly been true of *marginal agrarian regions* in which the international capitalist division of labor has acted to maintain pre-capitalist relations of production while transforming their function to production of commodities for the world market.

This was true of Eastern Europe after the 16th century (the so-called "second serfdom" discussed by Engels); it has been true of Latin America for much of its history; and it was true of the American South during slavery. (A more contemporary example is provided by Mahmood Mamdani in his book *Politics and Class Formation in Uganda* (MR, 1976) which discusses the various ways in which British colonialism conserved and transformed non-capitalist modes of production in that country.)

World capitalism needed the cotton that the American South could produce. The American South was not capable of producing cotton under *capitalist relations of production* because free laborers would not remain on the plantation as long as free land was available elsewhere. Slave relations of production provided the means with which to produce cotton for the world market and maintain effective control over the labor force. Agricultural production in the American South was performed *within the world capitalist system* at the same time that it was also performed under *slave relations of production*. World capitalism benefited from the maintenance and reproduction of these non-capitalist relations throughout this period, and would have

suffered from their precipitous dissolution. Thus England favored the South during the Civil War precisely because of its dependence on cotton raised by slave labor.⁹ Exactly how the slave mode of production functioned within the context of world capitalism is our next topic.

The Slave Mode of Production in the United States

When two modes of production exist alongside of each other, interacting with one another, they are said to be *articulated*. When this articulation is one in which one mode of production is subordinate to the domination of the other the resulting relationship produces determinant effects on the subordinate mode. Under these conditions the subordinate mode is modified and restructured in certain respects because it is dependent for certain of its conditions of existence and reproduction on the dominant mode.¹⁰

Slavery in the American South was a special form of the slave mode of production, one subordinate to the world capitalist system and dependent on the international division of labor and the world market created by it. As such, US slavery exhibited both the relations of production generally characteristic of all slave modes of production, and specific features particular to it as a result of its subordination to capitalism.

The slave mode of production is defined by three principal features which constitute the specific relations of production appropriate to it: (a) unlike capitalism, slavery is a mode of production characterized by the ownership of the laborers (slaves) as the legal property of the non-laborers (planters); (b) under the slave mode of production all elements of the production process are the property of the slave owners (Unlike feudalism, under slavery the slaves are separated from the means of production and unable to set them into motion); (c) under slavery the entire product of the slave's labor goes to the slaveowner.¹¹

American slavery exhibited all these features. However, because of its relationship of subordination to world capitalism, it was dependent for its existence on a number of external, purely capitalist conditions. This dependence expressed itself in a number of features which restructured and modified American slavery by comparison to its ancient counterparts. US slavery depended upon world demand for the commodities it produced, and capitalist production for the commercial goods not manufactured in the South. It functioned in competition with other raw material producing regions and was at the mercy of the booms and slumps characteristic of capitalistic economies. Since slave-produced commodities were sold on the world market, capitalist calculation entered into the investment in slaves and the estimation of profits from the employment of slave labor.

Southern slavery was also closely tied in with US capitalism, in particular; functioning as it did within the US commerce, credit and banking system and the broader commercial and financial structure of the nation. The relative strength and importance of the Southern economy within this structure, and the political ramifications of that power, were important factors in the onset and outcome of the Civil War. Grasping the non-capitalist nature of US slavery is politically important for a number of reasons. It is

necessary for an understanding of the dynamic of capitalism as a world system, both historically and in the present period. It is necessary in order to understand the sources of uneven regional development within the United States (see below), and the vestiges of non-capitalist production relations which continued in the South after the Civil War. And it is necessary to understand the continuing historical legacy of slavery whose specific ideological effects on Americans, black and white, is a separate and distinct component in the general ideological history of American capitalism.

Civil War, Reconstruction and After

The causes of the Civil War were many and complex. An adequate discussion of them cannot be attempted here. A few comments are necessary, however. The Civil War was not fought to end slavery, although that was obviously a byproduct of it. The war was essentially fought over the question of the political power of the Southern planters in the national government, and the extension of slavery into new territories. Since slavery was only possible where it was legally sanctioned (where ownership of slaves was protected by law), the planters recognized the vital importance of the exercise of political power in the national and local governments in order to insure favorable legal and political conditions in the new states seeking entrance in the Union. This brought them into increasing conflict with the masses of free farmers, artisans, small capital and, ultimately, sections of the northern bourgeoisie. This conflict came to a head when the political representatives of these groups coalesced into the Republican Party and succeeded in electing Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in 1860 in the face of a divided Democratic opposition.

The destruction of the national political power of the slaveowning class and the consolidation of a national home market for the products of Northern industry were the principal concern of Northern capital (breaking the South's close economic relationship with England) during the war and its aftermath. This having been accomplished, the masses of former slaves and poor whites were left to their fate. Without Northern support and/or a revolution in land tenure, their own efforts were insufficient to break the economic and political power of the planters and prevent the reemergence of the plantation system on altered foundations. Thus capitalism came to Southern agriculture, but it did so bound hand and foot by vestiges of the slave system which preceded it. On this basis the South was rebuilt, continuing to be an agrarian commodity producing region, with labor relations which were no longer slave, but not yet entirely capitalist. The Southern question, if it is to be understood, must be seen in terms of the dynamic of uneven regional development within a capitalist social formation.

Uneven Regional Development

Just as many Marxists and historians hold to the erroneous view that capitalism must always and only dissolve any non-capitalist modes of production in which it comes into contact, so too the view frequently prevails that,

within any country, capitalism is driven to destroy all non-capitalist forms of production and labor and convert that country into one homogenous capitalist unit. This incorrect approach proceeds from the notion that capitalism develops homogeneously and evenly as it expands. From Lenin we know that this is not the case *internationally*: capitalism develops in accordance with the *law of uneven development*, that is, it expands faster and more broadly in some countries than in others. Less well known is that this law applies equally *within* capitalist social formations: capitalism develops rapidly in some regions while reproducing "underdevelopment" in others. Recognizing this fact enables us to understand how capitalism proceeds to develop capitalist relations of production and exchange in some regions and how, at the same time, it perpetuates non-capitalist and semi-capitalist forms of production and labor in others.¹²

The unevenness of the development of capitalism within the different regions of a single country has chiefly expressed itself in the maintenance of *relatively backward agrarian regions* supplying the more developed industrial regions of that country with agricultural raw materials and cheap labor. Here we can see the link between the way capitalism conserves non-capitalist modes of production and the dynamic of uneven regional development. Far from being driven to dissolve semi-capitalist forms of production and labor, in such cases capitalism profits from their maintenance and reproduction.

Marx interpreted Ireland's relation to England in terms of uneven regional development:

Ireland is at present only an agricultural district of England, marked off by a wide channel from the country to which it yields corn, wool, cattle, industrial and military recruits.¹³

Other examples of uneven regional development include the place of Flanders in Belgium, Southern Italy as described by Antonio Gramsci, and the American South.¹⁴

Just as world capitalism profited from slavery in the pre-Civil War South as the "efficient" way of producing cotton and tobacco, so too after the Civil War the maintenance of the South as a source of agricultural products on the basis of semi-slave labor conditions, and as a stable market for northern industrial products, served the interests of developing US national capital.

The South's relative backwardness has served capital well through the years. In the immediate post-Civil War period the new Southern economic order was solidified through the creation of a system of agricultural credit which insured the dependence of Southern farmers on Northern merchant-bankers and guaranteed that the region's economic surplus would be expropriated by Northern capitalists.¹⁵ Because of this credit system and governmental tariff policies, the South was also made dependent on Northern capital for its manufactured goods and foodstuffs. In the early years of the 20th century, US capital began to draw on the South for its labor supply (black and white) when the wave of immigration to American shores subsided. Although the mechanization of Southern agriculture and increased industrialization after World War II acted to overcome the most extreme forms of regional inequality, the South, with its higher rates of profit and lower wages, still remains an attractive location for capital investment and runaway shops.

Failure to appreciate the dynamic of uneven regional development and how it functions to the advantage of capital can lead to important political as well as theoretical errors. The Communist Party USA in the 1930s held to the view that the existence of pre-capitalist vestiges in the South was an impediment to capitalist development which the bourgeoisie had an objective interest in overcoming. Therefore, instead of seeing capital as a principal factor in the perpetuation of uneven development and of black oppression in that region, in the late 1930s the Communists saw it as an ally in the struggle against the Southern plantation system. As James W. Ford, a prominent Party leader later admitted, Communists operated under the illusion "that the bourgeoisie would industrialize the South and itself open up the path of bourgeois-democratic development," without the necessity of a determined struggle by the oppressed themselves.¹⁶

Today the failure to recognize the effects of uneven regional development on the South is a failure to grasp the historical specificity of the South, economically, politically and ideologically. For the South has not historically developed just like other sections of the country and this difference is not accidental. Economically the "underdevelopment" of the South has always benefited capital by providing cheap raw materials and cheap labor to the national economy. Politically the disenfranchisement of blacks has worked to perpetuate a bloc of reactionary Southern Democrats whose power in Congress since the Reconstruction period has been a decisive factor in the development of American domestic and foreign policy. Ideologically and culturally, the mythology which has always cloaked the "old South" and its conception of "the Negro's proper place," has been vital to the reproduction and spread of American racism. All of these distinct features of Southern history and life are not fortuitous, but rather the product of specific determinant conditions which must be understood if the place and role of the South in American life is to be adequately explained.

Share Cropping and Debt Peonage

If the Civil War "freed" the slaves, the failure of Reconstruction to break up the plantation system kept them tied to the land in what Lenin called a "semi-slavery system" of bondage: share cropping, tenant farming and debt peonage. The reproduction of these relations of production and labor control was made possible by four principal mechanisms, two internal to the new plantation structure, and two external to it.

First, in share cropping the tenants provide nothing of their own to the production process but their labor and that of their families. Therefore, with regard to methods of production and output they are subject to extensive landlord control and regulation. Second, the share cropper is tied down through chronic indebtedness. Since they are not compensated for their crops until harvest time, for much of the year they are indebted to the landlord and/or local shopkeeper for all their necessities.

Two factors external to share cropping helped to reinforce it and the continued oppression of blacks. The first was the lack of alternative employment opportunities in the South for blacks. They were effectively barred from

purchasing land for themselves, and there were scarcely any non-agricultural jobs open to blacks in the region, at least until the First World War. Secondly, the Southern system of legal controls over job recruiters for employment opportunities outside the South either banned their activity or forcibly removed them when discovered.¹⁷

These economic mechanisms coupled with the maintenance of political power in the hands of the landowning classes and racist ideology, concretized through all Southern institutions and relations, kept the black population impoverished, disenfranchised and relatively immobile. The inevitable resistance to these conditions and attempts at flight were met with lynching, Ku Klux Klan terror and increased repression. As a result, throughout this period (Reconstruction to World War I), the vast majority of black Americans remained in the South. In 1860, 92% of US blacks lived in the South. In 1910 the figure was still 89%.

World War I

Even though the Southern region of the United States was able to continuously reproduce its social relations, and thereby the oppression of the black masses, it was still ultimately subordinate to the national capitalist economy and subject to its influence and transformations. As long as that national economy could meet its labor requirements elsewhere, and other conditions remained relatively unchanged, there was no impetus to disturb the Southern system of labor control, particularly given the labor intensive nature of cotton production. The plantation economy only began to break up during World War I, a process which was rapidly accelerated after the Second World War.

Before World War I, as noted above, the plantation system was able to tie blacks to the land through the combined effects of internal coercion and a weak external demand for black labor outside Southern agriculture. Until the War this external demand for labor was weak because northern and western capitalism had readily available a plentiful supply of labor—provided by the flow of immigrants coming to the United States. Between 1870 and 1920 immigration to this country averaged more than 500,000 a year. Not only did the War (and subsequent restrictive immigration laws) drastically curtail the flow of persons into the United States, but it also caused a sudden increase in production, with a concomitant increase in the demand for labor.

The South now became the focus of intensive labor recruitment, as the region was flooded with recruiters from Northern firms looking to coax blacks North. The black peasantry saw a way out of semi-slavery and responded overwhelmingly. The resultant black migration northward unfolded in two waves, the first in 1916-1917, following US entry into the World War, the second, in 1922-23, corresponding to the peak of post-war industrial activity.¹⁸

Whereas, prior to 1916 black migration North had been between ten and twelve thousand annually, thereafter it jumped to 200,000 annually. An estimated one million blacks joined the northward trek in these few short years. Between 1910 and 1920 the Black population increased in Chicago from 44,000 to 109,000; in New York from 92,000

to 152,000; in Detroit from 6,000 to 41,000; and in Philadelphia from 84,000 to 134,000.¹⁹

While this migration was a blow to the plantation system it was by no means a fatal one. In 1920, of the ten and a half million black Americans, eight million were still living in Southern states. Share cropping continued to dominate agricultural production and the structure of Southern black oppression; its death knell would not be sounded until World War II.

Black Oppression in the North

The newly arrived blacks in Northern cities found themselves facing new and different trials. While the character and tempo of their abandoned rural lives had been dictated by the agricultural cycle, in the North they found themselves subject to the harsh realities of urban industrial life and the tempo of the factory. A proletariat was being formed out of the former black peasantry, parallel to a similar process which was proletarianizing the former rural immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe and Ireland—a parallel process, but not the same process, for blacks suffered, under the stigma of racism, a distinct and specific oppression which cannot be reduced to the class and social oppression suffered by the immigrants.

Like the rest of the workingclass, blacks were now directly subject to the doubly determined rhythm of the capitalist economy: the effects of the combination of the business cycles of recession and recovery with the long wave cycles of capitalist expansion and contraction.²⁰ But while blacks were not alone in feeling the effects of these economic cycles and their social ramifications, they also experienced them in a qualitatively different way, due to their specific place within the social and technical division of labor. Racism and the class structure determined that place and it dictated that blacks would be the last to enjoy the benefits of economic prosperity and the first to feel the effects of an economic crisis.

The presence of significant numbers of blacks in large urban centers also created new forms of division and segmentation within the urban workingclass, while at the same time reinforcing older, more traditional distinctions within the existing division of labor. Blacks entered the labor force at a time when capitalism, via Taylorism and Fordism,²¹ was creating a new type of worker through a general process of deskilling and the creation of an homogenous interchangeable unskilled worker. The danger inherent in this process for the capitalist was the possibility that the breakdown of class stratification at the point of production would lead to increasing class solidarity and class consciousness.

Class stratification did not disappear, however. A new technical division of labor emerged, facilitated by new technology, the existence of skilled craft unions, and the acceptance of rules of seniority and promotion which worked to the advantage of skilled, white workers. More importantly, if Taylorism and Fordism were acting at the economic level to homogenize the male workingclass, political and ideological relations, most importantly racism, served to produce and reproduce a separation between whites and blacks within all institutions and social practices of society. This separation of blacks was simultaneously

their isolation and subordination which blocked them from receiving rights and conditions of existence which whites enjoyed. Racial oppression thus made possible additional economic class oppression: the value of black labor power could be kept below the value of white labor power and this inequality was then maintained and reproduced in production itself. As Michel Aglietta explains:

Once racism was deeply implanted in social consciousness, and reproduced by the regular functioning of politico-ideological institutions, a segmentation of the labor market could be introduced even into large-scale industry. The same simple labor-power, employed in the same type of fragmented activities, was paid differently according to race, since one section of the workingclass was ceded lesser rights of reconstitution than the other by society.²²

Thus a definite black sub-labor market emerged, the so-called "Negro jobs." Blacks were relegated to the hottest, dirtiest and most dangerous jobs; they were denied advancements and paid less. Outside the factories they faced systematic discrimination in residential housing; this was also the era of the rise of the black ghetto. In times of economic crisis they experienced higher unemployment, greater social dislocation and were the objects of the misdirected frustration of the white workingclass (the urban race riots of 1917 and 1919).

In addition to its function of maintaining division within the workingclass, racism worked to the advantage of capital in other ways. It made it possible to keep a sizable portion of the black population constantly unemployed as an industrial reserve army which exerted pressure on the entire workingclass not to raise its sights for fear of being replaced. At the same time, the previously noted ability of capital to impose wages and working conditions on blacks which were below the level established for other workers, enabled it to extract an additional source of profit from this section of the class.

The Great Depression

The depression significantly affected all aspects of the life of American blacks. It arrested the flow of blacks to the North, deepened the crisis of Southern agriculture, and reversed the incorporation of blacks into the labor force. Nationally blacks experienced a greatly disproportionate share of unemployment, two-thirds greater than white unemployment rates. Overall blacks lost one-half of the jobs they had previously held in industry. While they managed to hold on to a sizable percentage of the "Negro jobs," their presence in other sectors of industry was seriously eroded as they were dismissed in higher proportions from the better positions than whites.²³

Meanwhile, in the South, the plantation economy continued in spite of the economic crisis, or rather because of it, since the depression halted significant further northward migrations while blocking the mechanization of agricultural production. The number of share croppers continued to increase, while many blacks who had managed to become owners or part owners of land during the better decade of the 1920s were wiped out. As late as 1940, 86.9% of the black population continued to live in the South.

At first the New Deal had little to offer the black masses. Under the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) black tenant farmers and share croppers were the first thrown off their land as a result of the government's crop reduction policy. National Recovery Administration (NRA) protections for workers were rarely invoked to protect black jobs, while the model Tennessee Valley Authority hired blacks as unskilled labor but refused to admit them into its training programs.²⁴

Only the resolute efforts of blacks in the course of the mass struggles of the 1930s helped to alter this situation. Through their participation in the struggles of the unemployed and for industrial unionism, as well as in such organizations as the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, the Sharecroppers' Union, and the National Negro Congress, blacks fought for an end to governmental and private discrimination, brutality and indifference. In this they were aided by progressive sections of the labor movement, led by the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and others. They also received some limited and contradictory support from sections of the New Deal Administration which sought to draw black voters into the Democratic Party orbit.

Blacks and the Labor Movement

The relationship between blacks and the American labor movement has always been a contradictory one. Except for its early years, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) consistently practiced a policy of racial exclusion which kept blacks out of all but a few unions, notably the United Mine Workers and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters organized by A. Philip Randolph. The unions sought to justify their position by pointing out that often blacks newly arrived from the South were used by employers as strike-breakers and scabs, while other employers such as Henry Ford hired large numbers of blacks convinced that they would prove to be a loyal, anti-union work force.²⁵ By way of response, blacks defended themselves by pointing to the lack of jobs open to them and to the racist hostility of organized labor which refused to fight for or defend the interests of black workers.

The relationship between blacks and the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) was initiated on better terms as the CIO contributed to the organization of thousands of black workers in the basic industries. Unfortunately, while the left-wing of the CIO, most importantly the Communists, were sincerely committed to fighting racism, by and large the organization as a whole failed to take up the demands of black labor outside of paper resolutions. In the early period of CIO strikes for union recognition, white organizers actively solicited the support of black workers as necessary for organizational success. At times these alliances were forged over the protest of backward local workers, frequently Southern whites. Once unionization was achieved, however, the unions by and large turned their backs on their black members. Several studies of the auto industry in Michigan show that the United Auto Workers Union (UAW) failed to bring about any substantial alterations of racial occupation distribution prior to World War II.²⁶ This then was the dilemma which the black worker faced:

He could see that management was cynically using him and exploiting racial antipathy in order to destroy the union movement. He could see that white workers were antagonistic to blacks and that they had restricted black opportunities in the past. White workers appeared to be every bit as cynical as management in laying aside racial bigotry when it was in their self-interest to do so—when blacks were needed for successful union organizing drives. Thus it was easy for black workers to say “the hell with everybody,” and pursue what they perceived as being in their own self interest.²⁷

The contradictions between blacks and the labor movement were never satisfactorily resolved; on the contrary they increased markedly during and after World War II.

World War II and After

The Second World War was the catalyst which reversed the long wave of economic contraction and crisis which marked the 1930s. A new long wave of economic expansion was thereby inaugurated which lasted until the early 1970s. This period must be considered as the second stage of the integration of American blacks into the national industrial economy, and the decisive stage in the development of contemporary black economic, political and ideological life.

The decades after 1940 finally ended the plantation system and overwhelmingly transformed the black population from rural peasants to urban workers. The depression had hit Southern agriculture particularly hard. The wartime industrial upsurge which followed led to a renewed Northward exodus of labor and resultant rising labor costs. The solution to this labor problem was mechanization—a technological revolution in agriculture, made possible by new machinery produced by Northern industry. Whereas once blacks had been pulled out of the South by promises of jobs up North, in the 1950s they were being pushed out by mechanization. For example, in the period from 1949 to 1952 unskilled agricultural labor in twenty Mississippi counties declined by 72% and by 1957 it had dropped to 10% of the 1949 level.²⁸

Between 1940 and 1950 alone 1.6 million blacks migrated north, spurred by the knowledge of the tremendous demand for labor in the war-stimulated economy. Indeed, the immediate demand for black labor during the war years was greater than ever before. The absence of a white reserve army of labor caused by the rapid industrial upsurge and military conscription facilitated black employment opportunities in many areas hitherto closed to them. As Harold Baron notes:

World War II marked the most dramatic improvement in economic status of black people that has ever taken place in the urban industrial economy. The income of black workers increased twice as fast as that of whites. Occupationally, blacks bettered their position in all of the preferred occupations. The biggest improvement was brought about by the migration from South to North . . . However within both sections the relative proportion of blacks within skilled and semi-skilled occupations grew. In clerical and lower-level professional work, labor shortages in the government bureaucracies created a necessity for a tremendous black upgrading into posts hitherto lily-white.²⁹

Blacks Struggle Alone

Needless to say, these gains were not conceded to blacks without a struggle. Rather, a determined fight had to be waged throughout the war years to make them a reality. When the war began, the first labor shortages appeared in the skilled occupations, but black workers were not upgraded to meet these shortages. At the same time blacks were systematically excluded from defense jobs. The only way to break with this pattern of discrimination seemed to be the threat of a national protest movement, and A. Philip Randolph initiated the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) in the Spring of 1941, threatening to bring tens of thousands of protestors to Washington in June if the government did not do something about discrimination in the defense program. The black response was enthusiastic, and President Roosevelt, in a successful effort to call off the march, reluctantly signed Executive Order No. 8802 establishing the Fair Employment Practice Commission. Even so, the threat of a march on Washington had to be renewed in 1942 and again in 1943 to goad the Commission into activity.³⁰

In their struggles for more hirings and the upgrading of already employed workers, blacks found themselves virtually alone, without the support of some previous allies. Throughout the war years, but especially during 1943, white workers, including CIO members, repeatedly struck to protest the hiring and upgrading of black workers. Between March and June 1943, over 100,000 “man-days” were lost due to such racist strikes. Anti-black race riots occurred in Detroit in 1943 and in Philadelphia in 1944. The racism of sections of the white workingclass has been cited as a key factor in the electoral defeat of the UAW leader Richard Frankensteen who ran for Mayor of Detroit in 1945.

Nor did blacks win support for their wartime anti-discrimination struggles from the Communist Party. After the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Communists subordinated everything to the war effort, including the class and anti-racism struggles of the workingclass. It was not long before subordination became liquidation and the Party endorsed speed-up, piecework and the no-strike pledge, at the same time that it opposed the March on Washington! This abandonment of the class as a whole, and black workers in particular, during the early war years was followed by Browder’s “Tehran line” which promised a post-war world free of class and national conflict. Looking back on this period in 1945 a black Communist admitted:

We have helped disarm the workingclass and Negro people, rather than prepare them for the hard struggles which life now thrusts to the forefront. We have alienated ourselves from large sections of the people who refused to accept our Pollyanna line.³¹

McCarthyism and the Cold War

The post-war period saw the further isolation of blacks from the rest of the workingclass and other allies. The destruction of the Communist Party through governmental repression, the expulsion of the left from the CIO, as well as its own left and right errors, removed the Party from the

scene before it had a chance to really rectify the mistakes made during the Browder period. The destruction of the left forces in the CIO, and the general retreat of the labor movement which accompanied it, saw a further erosion of white commitment to the struggle against discrimination. What little black-white unity remained was largely a matter of common work-related grievances which did not extend beyond the factory gates. Thus, black and white auto workers cooperated in the 1948 Chrysler strike, but most white workers would not support a move to desegregate restaurants located near the plant.³²

The 1946 CIO Southern organizing drive, for example, was soon turned over to regional directors well versed in racism and anti-communism. The drive was turned into a campaign to organize white workers first, and blacks were often relegated to segregated locals, if they were organized at all. By the time of the 1955 AFL-CIO merger, labor's only commitment to civil rights was in paper resolutions and convention rhetoric.

General Trends, 1940-1970

The persistence of racism and discrimination in all areas of American life during these years should not blind us to the actual economic gains made by blacks in this period. The post-war long wave of economic expansion and prosperity, which lasted until the early 1970s, provided certain favorable conditions for the improvement of the economic life of black people, which in turn brought about further dramatic changes in urbanization and employment. Whereas, in 1940, 51% of blacks still lived in rural areas, by 1950 the figure had dropped to 38%. Black urbanization continued through the next decades reaching a figure of 81% in 1970.

In 1940 over three-fourths of all blacks still lived in the South, close to two-thirds of Southern blacks lived in rural areas there, and half of them were still engaged in agriculture. By 1969 slightly over 50% continued to live in the South, but now 58% of these were living in urban areas and only 4% were still engaged in agriculture.³³

If the decades of economic prosperity benefited both whites and blacks, they did not share equally in its fruits. Black unemployment remained consistently higher than that of whites, and over all black income was significantly lower. Economic growth provided opportunities for integration of blacks into previously restricted sections of the national economy, but institutional racism at all levels continued to limit, if not entirely block their admittance.

While throughout this period blacks fought against racism and discrimination, gains were always partial, uneven, and constantly threatened with reversal. The most successful campaigns were those of the Civil Rights movement in the South in the 1950s and 1960s. Seen in retrospect the Civil Rights movement was primarily a significant assault on the forms of discrimination specific to the South and the institutional vestiges of the Plantation economy (voting rights, access to accommodations, etc.). Thus while the movement was able to pull together an impressive national coalition against Southern discrimination, the economic and political effects of this campaign for ghettoized northern blacks who experienced different institutional forms of racism were limited. The

principal impact of the Civil Rights Movement on northern blacks was ideological, and it laid a foundation for the wave of ghetto rebellions and black liberation struggles which marked the 1960s and 1970s.

Between 1950 and 1970 the class differentiation within the black community was documented by the doubling of the percentage of black males in bourgeois, petty bourgeois and skilled craft occupations. Out of a total workforce of 7,420,000 in 1970, about 2% of blacks were classified as nonfarm managers and administrators; 8% were classified as professional or technical employees. The number of elected black officials increased from 103 in 1964 to 1,469 in 1970 and to 4,311 in 1977.³⁴

At the same time, however, the percentage of black males in low-paid, unskilled jobs remained virtually unchanged throughout this period as nearly two-thirds of all working black males continued to occupy these positions. The figures for black women are also significantly skewed to the lower paid and unskilled occupations. Jay R. Mandle analyzes the data:

The 1970 data suggest that Blacks [were] no longer exclusively confined to the low level jobs which were available to them upon their initial movement North. At the same time the continuing concentration of Blacks at relatively low occupation levels also suggests that nothing like a full process of occupational integration has occurred. . . The result is that while there is a widening of the range of occupations realistically within the grasp of individual black workers, black laborers as a group continue to fill the role of providing low level labor within the economic system.³⁵

The Second Slump

Just as the great depression of the 1930s signaled a dramatic change in the fortunes of American and world capitalism, so too the current economic crisis or long wave of economic contraction, which began in the early 1970s, promises equally significant changes in the character and balance of forces on a world and national scale. With regard to American blacks the present crisis threatens to wipe out the gains won through struggle in all spheres of life over the last fifty years.

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The structural causes of the present crisis are many and complex, as are the more direct factors threatening black economic and social life. Here it is only possible to look at some of the broader processes working against the progress of the black community. One of the more significant directly economic factors relates to industrial developments which have paralleled the process of black urbanization. Parallel to the movement of black concentration into the central cities has been another process: that of the shift of industrial growth to areas *outside* of metropolitan centers. This latter process in turn was part of the general tendency toward urban decay and white flight to the suburbs. Figures show that by 1969, 55% of all blacks resided in central cities, constituting one out of every four in the populations of large metropolitan areas (one million plus). Yet between 1959 and 1967, 79% of the employment growth in manufacturing occurred outside the central cities while growth in retail and wholesale trade was overwhelmingly located in the suburbs as well.³⁶

If the immediate causes of the present crisis are often difficult to assess, their effects on the black workingclass are quite clear, as became apparent during the 1974-75 recession and the hesitant recovery that followed. This recession, being the first situated within the new long wave of economic contraction and stagnation, while adversely affecting all workers, hit blacks and other minorities with particular intensity. The contrast between the figures for this recession and previous ones unmistakably demonstrate that we have entered into a *qualitatively* different period as far as the relative effects of economic crises on blacks and whites are concerned.

During the recessions of 1953-54, 1957-58, 1960-61, and 1969-71 both blacks and whites experienced parallel increases in unemployment, while in the recoveries that followed the decreases in unemployment were likewise parallel. For example, during the 1954-57 recovery white unemployment declined by 20% while black unemployment fell by 16%. During the 1969-71 recession white unemployment increased by 72% while black unemployment increased by 68%. The exception to these figures is the unemployment rate for black teenagers which generally continued to increase during both recessions and recoveries.

The figures for the 1975-77 recovery represent a dramatic contrast to the preceding ones. While both black and white unemployment increased significantly during the 1974-75 recession, the following recovery was the first one in twenty years in which white unemployment declined *while black unemployment rose sharply*. During 1975-77 unemployment declined by 16% for all whites while it rose by 2% for all blacks. While joblessness among white women fell by 11%, it increased by 13% among black women. Finally, while unemployment among white teenagers declined by 9%, among black teenagers it increased by 6%.³⁷

The exact meaning of these figures for the long term can be best understood when seen in context of the present long wave phase of economic crisis of the US capitalist system of which it is an expression. During such phases business cycles express themselves within a general tendency toward stagnation and contraction. Thus periods of recovery tend to be weak, transitory and uneven, while periods of recession tend to be, by contrast, longer and deeper.³⁸ What this means for black Americans and other marginalized

sections of the workingclass is this. While for the workingclass as a whole conditions are deteriorating, this deterioration is not uniform and uninterrupted, but, particularly for unionized white male workers, relatively moderated by periodic, if transitory, economic recoveries, and the ability of workers, through organized activity, to hold the line against inflation. Yet the weak and uneven character of these present recoveries is such that they do not appreciably counteract the general deteriorating situation of blacks the way they do for white workers. Given that blacks are everywhere confronted with institutional racism, and are both lacking organized forms of mass resistance and struggle and denied an effective voice in the general organizations of class resistance, they do not have the power which the organized sections of the white workingclass controls to resist this deterioration. For these same reasons they are a favorite target of capital and the capitalist state, which seeks to shift the burden of the crisis onto the backs of those who are both easily targeted and less able to successfully fight back.

Black/White Economic Gap

The result of the disparate effects of economic crisis on black and white is a widening gap between the two groups. In 1975 the jobless rate for blacks was 1.7 times higher than the white jobless rate. By 1978 it was 2.3 times higher. Other

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figures are equally telling. Despite some narrowing of the gap between blacks and whites with regard to individual earnings, the same cannot be said for overall earnings. In 1978 the earnings of all black male workers was only about two-thirds the earnings of white male workers, while the earnings of all black female workers were only two-fifths of those of white men. And among those able to work year-round full-time the earnings of black men and women were, respectively, only 74% and 55% of the earnings of white men.³⁹

Similar figures in other areas could be cited. As the number of multiple earners in black families has fallen in recent years because the rising unemployment, the median income of all black families relative to the income of all white families fell from 62% to 59% in a single year (1976). In short, not only have blacks suffered severely as a result of the present economic crisis, but they are suffering disproportionately so that the limited gains of the 1950s and 1960s now stand threatened, a threat which has received an enormous boost with the reactionary austerity offensive of the Reagan administration and the dismantling of governmental programs and services which affect all workers, and specific affirmative action and other programs previously established to specifically target racism and discrimination. How these developments are linked to the rising tide of racist and right-wing ideology is discussed in Part II of this article.

Part II: The Ideology of Racism

There is perhaps no major area of Marxist theory which has been less developed and more misunderstood than the study of ideology. Most of the important work which has been done in this field (aside from the extremely valuable writings of Antonio Gramsci) has only been produced in the last ten years, and that almost entirely in Europe.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, the theoretical and political struggle against racism has by and large failed to take up and utilize recent developments in the Marxist theory of ideology, to its continuing detriment. The following remarks are meant as an effort to acquaint militants in the anti-racist struggle with the tremendous potential inherent in the use of advanced Marxist theory in the analysis of, and the struggle against racism.

Whether ideology is described in terms of the base-superstructure metaphor, or as one of three instances (economic, political, ideological), Marxist theory recognizes that it functions as a distinct and necessary component of every social formation. If recognizing the *existence* of a distinct ideological level has not been a problem for Marxists, characterizing the *relationships* between ideology and the other levels and social classes certainly has. Indeed the Marxist treatment of ideology has historically been dominated by three errors: economism, instrumentalism and class reductionism.⁴¹

Economism, Instrumentalism, and Class Reductionism

Economism reduces the complexity of the ideological level and its relationship to the economic level to a simple explanation: ideology and ideological changes are produced by, and correspond to, the needs of the economy. Thus, for example, racism is seen as the ideological expression of the need of the capitalist economy in this country to obtain super-profits from the exploitation of black labor.

Instrumentalism reduces ideology to a deliberate and conscious effort on the part of capitalists to fool the workingclass and keep it confused and oppressed. Instrumentalism usually merges with various "conspiracy theories." Thus racism is nothing more than a plot hatched by the ruling class to keep the workers weak and divided, fighting each other instead of capital.

Class reductionism reduces all ideological movements and struggles to the class interests of which such movements are understood to be a simple expression. Class reductionism insists that every ideology must necessarily correspond to one class or another; that is, that every ideology *by its very nature* has an essential class character. Thus, for example, certain Marxists have argued that nationalism is essentially and immutably bourgeois ideology and that, therefore, the nationalism of oppressed peoples must be reactionary ("all nationalism is reactionary"⁴²).

Against all of these errors contemporary Marxism poses alternative conceptions of the nature and character of ideology. These alternative conceptions can be summarized in the form of a number of theses.

The Nature of Ideology

1. The ideological instance of any social formation is a distinct, historically determined structure of beliefs, discourses (systems of beliefs), institutions and practices, with its own contradictions and rhythm of development, none of which can be reduced to, or divorced from, the economics or politics of that social formation. At the same time, however, ideology is *inseparable* from those economics and politics because ideology is the means by which human beings in that social formation understand their own economic and political conditions of existence.

This indeed is the function of ideology: to orient individuals and classes to the social structures of society so that they can act within those structures in appropriate ways.⁴³ Understanding how this process of ideological construction of individuals occurs, requires a break with the traditional notion that ideology is only a collection of ideas floating above society. Ideology, instead, must be understood as a *material force*, a part of social relations themselves, for not only do capitalist social relations necessarily reproduce their economic and political conditions of existence, but they also must reproduce their ideological conditions of existence as well.

Ideology exists in, and is reproduced through the various social relations, social institutions and social practices of society. Some of the social institutions of capitalist society *primarily* function to reproduce bourgeois ideology and the

ideas and social practices which reinforce it. These include the media, the churches, cultural apparatuses, and the school system. At the same time there are other institutions and structures whose principal function is primarily *economic* or *political*, but which simultaneously perform ideological functions as well. Political parties, for example, are primarily political bodies, but they perform important ideological functions as well: producing the ideas, discourses and positions which are necessary for their political operation.⁴⁴

Racist ideology is therefore a material force, and not simply a system of ideas in the abstract. It exists in, and is reproduced through the social practices and relationships of discrimination and white supremacy. These practices and relationships serve political and economic functions of course, but they also perform ideological functions as well, *functions which are distinct from, and not reducible to, either economics or politics*. The lesson of the history of economism in the communist movement is that any attack on the economic function *alone*, without a specific struggle against the ideological effects of these practices and relationships is doomed to failure.

Thus, for example, the various advantages which white workers enjoy relative to black workers are the material basis of racist ideas in the white workingclass. This system of economic and social inequality between white and black workers performs economic functions for capital, but it also produces ideological effects as well. Countering these ideological effects requires specific practices and struggles *against racism*; they will not disappear as an automatic or natural result of an attack on their economic function alone.

2. The ideological level of the social formation is linked to the other levels through a relationship of complex or dialectical interaction called "relative autonomy." Relative autonomy means that the economics and politics of a social formation provide certain *conditions of existence and limitation*, within which that society's ideologies develop and clash; but these ideologies cannot be reduced to simple immediate expressions of that economics or politics. In other words, while the economy is determinant *in the last instance*, at any particular moment *there is no one-to-one correspondence* between the economy and changes in it, on the one hand, and ideology and ideological changes on the other. Rather the ideological level develops and changes *within* these limitations as a result of the unfolding of the contradictions within and between its own discourses, institutions and practices. In turn these processes of ideological change react back on and affect politics and economics.

Racism must, therefore, be seen primarily as the product of determinate ideological practices with their own irreducible interactions and contradictions. Economic, political, and ideological structures provide the *general* context within which racism develops and is reproduced, and they also provide the necessary conditions of class struggle in which racism produces definite effects. But racist ideology has a *specific* structure and life of its own; it is not a mere reflection of some fundamental economic essence. As noted above, changing economic or political conditions will not immediately and automatically eliminate racism; for that a specific and irreplaceable ideological struggle is required.

The Constitution of Subjects

3. Ideology functions by constituting individuals as *subjects*, that is, as conscious agents performing their given role in a structured, meaningful world. Ideologies constitute subjects by providing them with certain representations of the world which link them to their conditions of existence and to each other. In class societies these representations are produced under the domination of relations of class exploitation. For example, just as capitalism, in reproducing itself, reproduces the whole series of locations which constitute the social division of labor; so too, capitalist ideologies are reproduced which constitute individuals as agents to accept that social division of labor, recognize and identify with their role, and accept their place within it. It is important to note, however, that the constitution of subjects by capitalist ideology is never absolute: this process is constantly threatened by contradictions—those internal to the bourgeois ideological system, and those resulting from the clash between that system and alternative ideological systems and ideas which confront these subjects in the course of class and social struggles.

In general we can say that ideology constitutes subjects by providing them with a system of beliefs and discourse which defines the world in which they live, their role in it, and their relationships with others. Goran Therborn suggests that ideology does this through three major modes of ideological constitution. These modes tell individuals, relate them to and make them realize: (a) *what exists*, that is who they are, what the world is, what nature, society, men and women are like, etc.; (b) *what is good*, right, just, moral, beautiful, and their opposites. This mode structures desires and establishes behavior norms; (c) *what is possible* and impossible, and the nature and consequences of change.⁴⁵

Thus for example, bourgeois ideologies tell the subjects constituted by them that (a) capitalism is simply "human nature"; (b) that it is the best system in the world; and (c) that a better system is not possible. Alternatively, Marxist ideology constitutes subjects to think that (a) capitalism is not natural or inherent in "human nature"; (b) that it is neither a good nor a desirable system; and (c) that a socialist alternative is possible. Racist ideology can constitute subjects who believe that (a) there is an inherent biological inequality between one race and another; (b) that the preservation of the racial purity of the dominant race is good and right; and (c) that equality between people of different races is impossible.

4. All human individuals are constituted as subjects through the mechanisms of ideology, *whatever their place in the social division of labor*. That is, the ideological instance not only constitutes members of oppressed classes, but members of the oppressing classes. The latter, contrary to instrumentalism, do not stand *outside* of ideology, manipulating it in their own interest. They, too, are constituted by ideology to perform their role, and to understand their function of exploitation and domination, perhaps as a "divine gift," as the "natural order of things," or even as their "burden to bear." Dominant classes wage ideological struggle from *within* ideology, its structure and its limitations, *not outside of them*.

5. Ideology provides subjects with *representations* of the world, their relations to it and with each other. Ideology does not provide them with *knowledge* of the world the way science does. However, this does not mean that ideology is simply "false consciousness." On the contrary, ideology functions by means of a combination of *allusion* and *illusion*. Ideologies allude to social reality at the same time that they provide illusions of it.⁴⁶

Racism, for example, *alludes* to the different *physical* appearances of blacks and whites and to the *social* differences between them (differences in wealth, employment, education, political representation, etc.). At the same time it provides an *illusory* explanation of these differences. Instead of recognizing the non-essential character of differences in physical appearance and the actual material causes of black social inequality, it attributes both to some essential (biological or racial) difference which makes blacks inherently inferior. To see racism as totally false consciousness, because races and racial inferiority do not exist, is to miss the point. Ideology corresponds to perceptions of human relationships; and the very real (if not necessarily significant) differences to which racism *alludes*, provide the material basis for its *illusions*.

The Nature of Ideological Struggle

6. As noted earlier, ideologies do not exist in the abstract realm of ideas alone. They are material social processes, existing in institutions and practices which reproduce them. Moreover, ideologies do not exist in isolation from one another, but are linked with, and in opposition to other ideologies. They change, develop, and die out in the process of overcoming their own contradictions and in contending with other ideologies for domination. The class struggle, which is the motor force of history, is likewise the motor force in the transformation of ideology, in the manner in which ideologies succeed (or fail) in overcoming opposing ideologies, succeed (or fail) in constituting subjects in accordance with their discourse and practices.

Since ideology is a part of all social relations, ideological struggle involves not just expounding new ideas, but in actually changing social relations themselves, changing institutions and relationships and the way subjects understand and relate to the world and to others. Struggle against a particular ideology therefore requires identifying the discourses, practices and institutions which reproduce it, how they can be transformed, and what are the conditions necessary for this transformation. Thus, it is not enough to continually lecture white workers that they must fight racism (or give up their "white skin privileges"). Rather, two things are necessary to effectively fight this racism. Above all, it is necessary to: identify the specific ideological discourses, practices and institutions within which white workers participate which reproduces their racism; to develop a realistic strategy and tactics for transforming them, and to create the process of struggle which will implement the process. Second, it is necessary to begin to create new practices and institutions (forms of workingclass organization) within which white workers will begin to think of themselves as different individuals, ones no longer defined by racial criteria.

7. Ideologies and ideological discourse do not exist in the pure state, but are rather constantly changing in response to the class struggle, in general, and the ideological struggle in particular. Once racism exists, it does not remain static, but changes because of its location *within* an ideological level which also contains other ideologies, including non-racial and anti-racial ones, and *in relation to* economic and political levels which condition it. At the same time racism and all ideologies produce determinate effects in that economy and politics, effects which different classes seek to exploit to their advantage in the economic and political struggle.

To say that Marxism rejects instrumentalism is not to say that sections of capital do not seek to exploit racism in the course of the class struggle. Our argument with instrumentalism lies not in its recognition of the *desire* of classes and class fractions to accomplish certain goals, but in its appreciation of their *ability* to do so. Marxism holds that while sections of capital do try to exploit racism, they cannot succeed in doing so *at will*. The ultimate success of their efforts will be determined not by their subjective desires, but by the objective possibilities and limitations within racist ideology as it is reproduced, and by class and popular struggles at the economic, political and ideological levels.

Against Class Reductionism

The results of recent Marxist work on the theory of ideology demonstrate that not all ideologies and ideological elements are class specific.⁴⁷ By this we are not referring to the fact that subjects in a particular social formation are not defined in class terms. Rather, we mean that not all ideologies and ideological elements objectively have some kind of necessary "class essence" such that they correspond to the interests of that class, and that class only. Sexual identity and the ideological constitution of sexed subjects, for example, are the result of ideological processes which have no necessary class connotation, although they are always linked to other ideological processes which may (economic, legal, etc.).

Other examples can help clarify this point. Racial identity and racial pride are not class specific ideological elements. They function in one way in one ideological discourse, that of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1950s, and another in the ideological discourse of African independence movements during the same years. To attempt to reduce them both to some *identical class essence* is to reduce historical materialism itself to a vulgar caricature. Or consider nationalism: Is it either inherently bourgeois or proletarian ideology? Once again the answer is different, depending on the discourse within which it is contained. It was the former, for example, when it was situated within the official discourse of American imperialism during the Vietnam War, and the latter when it was situated within the discourse of the Vietnamese National Liberation Front in the same period. There was something of both (mostly the former) in the confused and contradictory discourses of the US anti-war movement.

The example of nationalism is illustrative of two points. First, nationalism, *by itself*, is neither bourgeois nor proletarian. Second, it only *becomes* one or the other when it is linked together (articulated) with a whole series of other

ideologies and ideological elements in a specific discourse, *linked together in such a way that the subject thereby constituted by the discourse thinks and acts in such a way as to support the interests of one class or another.*

These ideologies which do not have a specific class content on their own, therefore become prime battlefields in the ideological struggle. This is especially true of the ideological struggle *at the political level*, where each class tries to create a broad political bloc behind its own class objectives. In a bourgeois democracy like the United States, each class seeks to develop a political discourse which will employ elements like nationalism, "democracy," "freedom," and the "people," in a way that presents its own class objectives as the consummation of broad popular objectives and thereby rally members of other classes to its side. The US bourgeoisie has always been extremely successful in this endeavor, maintaining a broad national consensus behind its policies, which are always presented as representing the "national interest." This was quite successful during the so-called "Iranian Hostage Crisis"; it has been less successful with regard to US intervention in El Salvador.

This contradictory character of nationalism: its ability to function in both a bourgeois and a proletarian discourse is key to understanding the historical experience of black nationalism in this country. The history of black nationalism is the history of an ideological battlefield. Intellectual representatives of different classes in the black community, conceiving the liberation of their people in terms of the realization of the interests of the class they represented, have attempted to articulate nationalism within a discourse which would, at the same time, further the interests of their class. In the 1920s Marcus Garvey articulated nationalism within a petty bourgeois discourse, while simultaneously and in opposition to Garvey, the African Blood Brotherhood was trying to articulate it within a revolutionary proletarian one.

The history of the black liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s has likewise been characterized by a struggle between the petty bourgeois nationalism of the "cultural nationalists," and the proletarian nationalism of the "left" or "revolutionary" nationalists. In recent years this struggle has polarized nearly all participants around the issue of Marxism-Leninism: for or against? The results of these battles have been contradictory, for if "left nationalists" who embraced Marxism-Leninism have emerged as a distinct force in the black community, they have failed to constitute a viable national organization and create an effective political program with which to win the confidence of black workers, students, the unemployed and sections of the petty-bourgeoisie. But that is a separate article in and of itself.⁴⁸

10. Finally, if what we have said about the non-class character of certain ideologies is true, then the character of ideological struggle can now be understood in a new way. It is no longer a matter of simply posing an alternative ideology to the dominant ideology of capital and asking everyone to choose sides. In addition to providing new ideological elements, it is also necessary to dis-articulate (disrupt) the ideological discourses of capital by severing a variety of non-class elements such as "nationalism," "democracy," and the "people," from the way they function within that discourse, and re-articulating them within a new, popular-democratic discourse which can function on behalf

of the interests of the workingclass and oppressed peoples. Such a discourse, and the practices and institutions which can reproduce it, can facilitate the construction of new political subjects who will still define themselves as members of the "people," but now in such a way that this concept will not imply support for capital, but opposition to it. What this type of ideological struggle means for the movement against racism will be discussed in Part III of this article.

Defining Racism

Racism has been generally defined as follows:

By racism is meant the doctrine that a man's behavior is determined by stable inherited characteristics deriving from separate racial stocks having distinctive attributes and usually considered to stand to one another in relations of superiority and inferiority.⁴⁹

Such a general definition is useful only at the most abstract level of analysis. It is no longer sufficient as soon as one wants to stop speaking of racism in general, and begin to examine a specific racism, for example that of the United States. Vulgar Marxism, however, remains content to operate at the level of the greatest abstraction. It puts forward the uncomplicated view that all racism is the same: a lie initially invented to justify the enslavement of blacks and later perpetuated to divide white from black workers. This position treats racism simply as an illusion created by one class to fool another, without seeing it as a complicated social process. It, likewise, fails to recognize that racism is not a pre-given, finished system, but that it varies from social formation to social formation, depending on the economic, political and ideological conditions within which it exists. Not only are *racisms* different, for instance that of Brazil is not identical with that in the United States, but racisms change over time, as their conditions of existence undergo change and development.

It can therefore be said that US racism is a specific ideology, distinguishable from other racisms extant elsewhere by its characteristics, and history. Consequently, it stands on its own as a distinct object for study and analysis. What follows are some rough notes on the history of racism in the United States which attempt to apply a number of the general theoretical concepts and approaches presented in the previous sections of Part II of this article and elsewhere.

Racism: Historical Antecedents

The development of Western racism in general, and US racism in particular is, in reality, a complex historical process. Contrary to some claims, racism has not always been a part of the ideology of Western Europe. Instead, it developed in the 18th century as a result of the coming together of a number of pre-existing ideological currents under new economic and political conditions (most importantly, slavery and the slave trade), which transformed them into a new, specifically "racial" discourse.

The ideas of "race," ethnocentrism, and color prejudice all preceded the enslavement of blacks and the emergence of

racism as a distinct ideology. Black slavery was, however, decisive for their fusion-transformation into racism. As Eugene Genovese explains:

Previous ideological conditioning made possible a racially based slavery, and the growth of that kind of slavery transformed the conditioning from a loose body of prejudices and superstitions into a virulent moral disorder.⁵⁰

In England prior to the 18th century, "race" was primarily used in the sense of national "lineage." Thus 17th century English political struggles involved conflicting claims as to the origins of the English nation, the "descent of the Saxon race," and the imposition of the Norman yoke upon them in 1066 by a foreign people.⁵¹ From race as "lineage" it was not so great a step to race as a biological category.

Ethnocentrism (cultural chauvinism) is an historical feature of the ideologies of all Western societies, although it was particularly pronounced in Puritan England, where this Puritanism had been able to achieve dominance only as a result of lengthy civil strife. Here Puritan concepts of piety, discipline, order, self-restraint and work were seen as godly virtues, the lack of which marked a people for inferiority.

Finally, color prejudice had a history in European culture going back to the middle ages where the color black had become a symbol of baseness, evil and danger. Once slavery and the slave trade developed as a vital part of the functioning of the world capitalist system, these three relatively autonomous ideological currents began to come together. The black person was marked as something less than fully human in the practices and institutions of economics and the law (the slave codes), and notions of race, "ethnocentricity and color prejudice passed quickly, although perhaps not immediately, into racism."⁵²

At first, western racism functioned largely at the level of spontaneous ideology in the everyday practices and institutions of society and lacked a systematic and developed theoretical defense. Only in the middle of the 19th century did anthropologists, biologists and historians begin to attempt to justify colonial and racial practices on the basis of the "scientific" analysis of inherent biological differences. Thus institutions of higher learning became important sites for the reproduction of racist ideology. The work of these "scientific racists" was given an enormous boost by the theory of Social Darwinism which flourished in the second half of the 19th century, and which sought to justify social inequality on the basis of biological laws of the "survival of the fittest." This scientific racism added yet another current to the ideological arsenal of racism, one which, despite its transformations, remains with us today (Jensen, Herrnstein, Shockley, etc.).

The Development of American Racism

Once developed, American racism became a central and unifying element in the ideological formation of this country. It grew in intensity as capitalism itself expanded, and changed as the economics and politics of capitalism were transformed, thereby transforming its own conditions of existence. It also changed under the impact of the rise and fall of other ideological systems, which either facilitated

racism's reinforcement, or acted to counter-act its effects. Finally, the ideology of racism was transformed by changes in the role and importance of various ideological institutions: the decline of the churches in American life and the rise of the public school system and the mass media, for example.

American racism has always existed and been reproduced at two distinct, but inter-related levels. One is the "common sense" of popular ideological prejudice; the other is the pseudo-scientific theories of racism's intellectual defenders. Both have their own specific practices and institutions to reproduce them, and therefore, ideological struggle against both is imperative; a defeat for one is not necessarily a setback for the other.

Robert L. Allen has argued that the history of American racism can be divided into three broad periods: the biological racism of the pre-civil war period; the racially based white supremacy of the era from the rise of American imperialism to World War I; and the cultural chauvinism of the modern period.⁵³ In each of these periods the type of racism which existed developed and was ultimately transformed as the result of the combined effects of changing economic and political conditions, on the one hand, and transformations in ideology and ideological struggle on the other.

Before the Civil War

In the pre-Civil War period racism was reproduced in both the North and the South, although the predominance of slavery in the South was the chief factor in its constitution and perpetuation. The plantation system dominated Southern economics; slaveowners dominated its political institutions; and planters' sons or their supporters were its intellectual spokesmen. As noted above, slavery could only exist where it was legally sanctioned, and thus the legal system of the "slave codes" was one of the chief institutions which not only politically sanctioned the slave economy, but facilitated the reproduction of racism. Since blacks were slaves, they had to be treated as things: the biological racism of this period was predicated upon the principle that blacks were not human beings.

The existence of free blacks, North and South, rendered this a difficult principle to consistently maintain and the ideological contradictions inherent in slavery were never fully resolved. As late as 1861 an Alabama court was still trying:

Because they are rational human beings, they are capable of committing crimes; and in reference to acts which are crimes are regarded as persons. Because they are slaves, they are . . . incapable of performing civil acts; and in reference to all such, they are things, not persons.⁵⁴

In the North "Jim Crow" and segregation also existed, even before the Civil War, although here it was not so much a matter of law as the systematic exclusion of blacks from the mainstream of the economy and politics which were the chief determining factors. *De facto* segregation and the relatively small numbers of Northern blacks shaped the characteristics of Northern racism in this period. If slavery was based on an ideology which denied the humanity of blacks, the ideology of abolitionism was primarily based on

its affirmation, but little else. As Allen notes, "abolitionists urged that black people, as human beings, should be free, but they were confused and often reactionary on the matter of racial equality."⁵⁵

After the Civil War: the Rise of Imperialism

The emancipation of the slaves transformed the entire dialectic of biological racism and the ideological debate which surrounded it in the preceding period. If the freed blacks were now conceded to be human beings (which was not always the case in racist ideology even in this period), they were certainly not considered to be the *equals* of whites. Biological racism began to give way to white supremacy: the notion that some races are born to rule while others are born to serve.

In the post-Reconstruction South the economic and political conditions of the re-established plantation system provided the material basis for "Jim Crow" and white supremacy to flourish. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s the "black codes," modelled on the pre-war "slave codes" were expanded to enforce segregation in every area of Southern life. The extremes to which the South would go to construct a secure and unbridgeable wall of inequality between Black and white can be seen in the case of Birmingham, Alabama which, in 1930, passed a law to prevent blacks and whites from playing checkers or dominoes together.

While Northern abolitionism had previously challenged Southern racism, the rise of monopoly capitalism and imperialism at the turn of the century insured that white supremacy would now find favorable conditions for its reproduction there as well. New structures of US *economic* domination abroad, requiring an ideological structure to explain and justify it, found in white supremacy an ideal rationale. *Politically*, the US Supreme Court sanctioned the "separate but equal" treatment of blacks and looked aside while blacks were systematically disenfranchised, discriminated against and lynched. *Ideologically*, this was the period in which "scientific racism" enjoyed its greatest influence, as anthropologists, ethnologists, historians and sociologists all contributed to "proving" and elaborating on the essential backwardness of "inferior" races. The Eugenics Movement was a particularly popular and well-financed project for the propagation and dissemination of racism from the turn of the century to World War II.

The combination of all these conditions, together with the lack of ideological system seriously challenging racism, enabled it to expand and become entrenched in the consciousness of the nation as never before or since. Nonetheless, the onset of the First World War set into motion a series of events which were to profoundly disrupt the economic, political and ideological structures which had so effectively facilitated the reproduction of white supremacy and cause it to undergo significant transformations.

Modern Racism

The war and its aftermath, as noted above, was the beginning of the end for the Southern plantation system, at the same time that it dramatically changed the face of

Northern urban and industrial life as blacks moved out of the South in record numbers. These changes not only affected the economy, they also were important in shaping the character of the New Deal coalition and the post-World War II Democratic Party, and the rise of the civil rights and black liberation movements. In fact ideological changes and ideological struggle played a decisive role in the transformation of racism in these years. Popular revulsion against fascism and Nazism with their myths of Aryan superiority cast traditional white supremacy in an unfavorable light, while the rise of socialist and national liberation and independence movements gave the lie to notions of "backward colonial peoples."

The dramatic struggles of American blacks themselves against racism and discrimination throughout this period forced significant changes in the structure and patterns of racism on a national scale. While white supremacy never entirely disappeared (and has even managed something of a comeback recently), as Robert Allen notes, increasingly it has come to be replaced by the ideology of cultural chauvinism, at least in the educational system and the scientific community. Cultural chauvinism centers its attention on the supposed inherent superiority of "Western Civilization" and the cultural backwardness of non-white peoples, who can only redeem themselves through racial integration and cultural assimilation.⁵⁶

The modern period has indeed witnessed tremendous ideological struggles over racism and its political and economic effects, the most important of which were stimulated by the contradictions created by the death of the plantation economy in the South, which rendered many of the legal underpinnings of the Jim Crow system vulnerable to attack. The civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, which concentrated their attacks on Southern *de jure* segregation, helped to bring black-white relations there more into line with patterns of *de facto* segregation and discrimination in the rest of the country. But the civil rights strategy as developed in those campaigns was inadequate and ineffective when it came to breaking down the Northern system of racial oppression and the economic and political structures which continued to support it.

In spite of these limitations, the civil rights movement was, nonetheless, a critical development in the struggle against racism *precisely* because it put the very issue of racism at the center of its strategy, and because it was able to mobilize a broad trans-class democratic movement against this ideology and its practices of segregation and discrimination. It proved that the struggle against black oppression was not a narrow *class* question or only the problem of *blacks*, but a broad popular-democratic struggle which was able to restructure social relations and mass consciousness in a new and powerful way. The civil rights movement was responsible in no small measure for the breadth and militancy of the Afro-American Liberation Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s which captured the imagination of the overwhelming majority of black workers, students, the unemployed, and even the black elite.⁵⁷

The Present Period

The victory of Reaganism politically and *ideologically*, the rise of the New Right, and the resurgence of the Ku Klux

Klan and Nazi groups are the most striking features of the present period. It is important to see these developments in context, however. They are the culmination of a whole series of processes: the onset of the present deep economic crisis of US and world capitalism; the resurgence of traditional racism and reaction generally, and in particular in the intellectual community; the crisis and decline of the black liberation and women's movements, etc. In a definite sense the 1960s and 1970s foreshadowed, and laid the basis for Reagan's victory.

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that Reagan's victory contains the seeds of a veritable, if unstable, ideological revolution. The ultra-right in this country, particularly since Barry Goldwater's defeat in 1964, had been relegated to the fringe of US politics. Its comeback was orchestrated around consolidating a new ideological discourse which combined nationalism, racism, sexism and anti-communism in a way that responded *immediately* and *directly* to the way popular consciousness perceived the failure of liberal welfare Keynesianism and the "threat" posed by blacks and other minorities, women and gays to America's ability to economically, politically and morally pull itself out of crisis in an increasingly hostile world. The New Right is attempting to forge a broad bloc of popular forces around a vague ideological consensus whose essentially racist and sexist content (and class agenda) is masked behind a whole series of traditional slogans: "national strength," "freedom" from big government, right to "life," the importance of religion, the family, renewed moral values, etc. This ideological consensus serves to advance the objective interests of capital at the same time that it invokes a whole series of ideological elements that have tremendous popular appeal, even among sections of the population which would otherwise be considered adversaries of capital, at least on some levels. That such an ideological consensus has the potential to succeed in mobilizing a very broad collection of otherwise opposing or conflicting groups can be measured by the strength of black support for Reagan (15% in the 1980 election) and the rise of "Black Reaganism" as a distinct political tendency in the black community.⁵⁸

The struggle against Reaganism, the New Right and the revival of racism, all require the serious attention of the American left. In previous issues of the *Theoretical Review* we have discussed some of the dimensions of a viable response.⁵⁷ In Part III of this article we will begin a discussion of some current requirements of the anti-racist struggle.

Part III: The Political Struggle

It is appropriate to begin this section of the article with a short summary of what it contains and what it does not. Part III does not contain a detailed political program for the struggle against racism in the United States. That can only develop in the course of this struggle itself, as understood and articulated by its most advanced representatives. To attempt to impose on this struggle *beforehand* an intricate and detailed framework would be more in keeping with a

dogmatist tradition of the New Communist movement, than it would with any genuine Marxist approach. Likewise, this article does not presume to tell the black liberation movement who its "correct" leaders are, or which organizations are pursuing appropriate or inappropriate lines of work. It is not that our theoretical framework does not contain definite *political* implications for the analysis of both these movements, it is just that we recognize our own limitations as a *theoretical* journal in the face of concrete analyses which can only be undertaken by *political* organizations actively involved with the struggles themselves. What Part III of this article *does* contain is a general framework of analysis within which what we consider to be some of the central theoretical requirements for taking up the political struggle against racism are situated.

Racism and the Democratic Struggle

Racism is a central determinant of social relations in the United States today, shaping the consciousness and practice of all classes and groups. It functions in the economy, in employment, in housing and the allocations of social services. It functions in politics, in the activity of political parties, government, the police, the prisons and the courts. It is reproduced by ideological apparatuses, the educational system, the media and religion. Racism exists in and is reproduced by beliefs and discourses of individuals and classes. In the same manner, the various institutions of capitalist society materialize racism within their practices and in their relations with the subjects constituted by them. Thus the system of racial oppression, the system of social inequalities between blacks and whites, is linked to the other systems of class and sexual oppression by the overall structure of capitalism which provides them with their ultimate economic, political and ideological conditions of existence.

Racial oppression is, at the same time, however, relatively autonomous from these other systems of oppression. This is because, while the capitalist mode of production requires a social division of labor based on exploitation, the mode *by itself* does not dictate why any particular group (blacks, women, etc.) occupy the positions they do within any particular social formation. This is determined, not by the mode of production, but by its particular evolution in the historical conditions of that social formation. Only an analysis of the history of the United States in its conjunctural specificity can provide us with knowledge of the relationship between racism and capitalism in this country.

One historical expression of this autonomy of racial oppression has been that the development of the struggle against racism has primarily taken the form of a general *democratic* movement to win for blacks the rights enjoyed by other sections of the population. Modern capitalism, Lenin tells us, is marked by the contradiction between the existence of democratic institutions and democratic aspirations on the part of the masses on the one hand, and imperialism's compulsion to limit democracy on the other.⁶⁰ US capitalism reflects this tension in its proclamation of the bourgeois democratic right of economic, political and social equality and the systematic denial of that right to minorities.

It is true that these rights, as applied to white workers for example, are in many cases restricted and limited in nature. But that in no way diminishes their importance, or the importance of the struggle to obtain them where they are denied. As Lenin said:

"Democracy" is nothing but the proclaiming and exercising of "rights" that are very little and very conventionally exercised under capitalism. But unless these rights are proclaimed, unless a struggle for immediate rights is waged, unless the masses are educated in the spirit of such a struggle, socialism is *impossible*. [Lenin's emphasis]⁶¹

From this perspective the struggle for the extension of bourgeois democratic rights to blacks and other minority peoples is a broad popular democratic struggle which, of necessity must involve not only those who suffer from the lack of these rights, but all the oppressed and exploited.

An All-Sided Struggle Against Racism

The breadth of this struggle against racism must be viewed not only in terms of the social forces it involves, but also in the forms of struggle it develops. We see three general and interrelated aspects of this effort which are capable of mobilizing significant sections of the American people against racism.⁶² These can be characterized as follows:

(1) the "battle of ideas" against racist beliefs and discourses as they have historically developed in the United States: in the language of everyday life; in the characterizations prevalent in the media, culture, music; in the discourses of power and politics; in the work of the scientific community.

(2) the struggle against institutional and structural racism and the institutional and social practices which reproduce them. This involves both specifically ideological institutions (the education system, busing, etc.), and other economic and political institutions (exclusionary hiring practices, discriminatory trade unions) which also function to reproduce racism.

(3) the struggle against overtly racist and fascist organizations, the KKK, Nazis, etc.

What follows is only the briefest outline of the principal features of each of these components of the anti-racist movement.

Against Racist Ideas

Although racism is materialized in practices and institutions, these structures function to reproduce racist effects: beliefs, discourses and the individuals constituted by them. Attacking the structures is not enough—the discourses themselves must be targeted and defeated—as well as replaced by alternative ones, if new subjects are to be constituted. This is an irreplaceable aspect of the anti-racist struggle. Moreover, the struggle over ideas is a constant and ever-present battle, while the struggle to significantly change a particular institution may only develop in particular periods. A militant in the educational system, for instance, must constantly do battle with racist ideas among students and staff, while the struggle for an affirmative action program in that institution or increased minority enrollment

may lack the necessary support to be an on-going effort.

Fighting racist ideas also requires a recognition of the ideological structure within which racism is situated. Racism in this country is located within a cluster of related discourses: national chauvinism, cultural chauvinism in the broadest sense, color prejudice, etc. Fighting racism effectively means taking account of the dynamics of these other ideological discourses as well, the way they reinforce each other, and the way that still others (democratic, socialist, etc.) can contradict and disrupt them. Ideological struggle is thus complex. It involves identifying racist ideas and expressions; fighting to isolate and disrupt them and other discourses which give them support; counterposing to them alternative perceptions of the reality which racism has previously mystified; in short, helping to constitute new subjects, and a new popular-democratic ideology.

Against Institutional Racism

We are all aware of the extent of institutional racism in American life. It manifests itself in the conduct of the police, the educational system, social services; it shows up in the practices of employment and job allocation, in promotions and seniority; it makes its appearance in the lack of blacks in leadership positions in trade unions, politics and governmental office at all levels.

The struggle against institutional and structural racism cannot be content with simply establishing non-racial criteria for the operations of these social processes. While that is one aspect of the problem, more fundamental is the fact that the accumulated effects of all the long years of racial discrimination have created material and structural *differentials* between blacks and whites which will not be overcome by simply establishing race-neutral guidelines for future work. There need to be, in addition, specific programs which *directly attack the structural differentials*. In some situations this will take the form of affirmative action programs, in others a more fundamental restructuring of the institution, and in still others its outright elimination. The final decision in this regard can only come out of the actual struggle as it unfolds and the balance of forces involved.

Wherever possible, the struggle against racist ideas on the one hand and against the practice of racist institutions on the other should be closely coordinated, so as to mutually facilitate each others work. In the final analysis it is only by drawing people into these struggles, and changing their relationships to social practice, that they can change themselves, becoming new subjects who see the world and act in it in a new way.

Against the Klan

The struggle against the Klan and related groups cannot be conducted within the narrow confines of vanguard actions on the part of a handful of leftists, as the tragedy of Greensboro showed. Instead we need a strategy which not only is capable of mobilizing large numbers of people to confront these racists, organizationally and politically, but we also need an effective campaign directed toward the social base from which these groups draw their members.

Further, fighting the klan is not only an ideological struggle, but also a political one, which means utilizing the broad political arena, and where necessary, legal means. While combining the ideological struggle, and utilization of laws, the courts and elections constantly poses the danger of reliance on the bourgeois state and its agents, the refusal to skillfully and correctly employ available means is a refusal to exploit the contradictions within bourgeois democracy to our advantage. Again, the exact extent to which mass mobilizations are supplemented by other tactics depends on the struggle and the forces involved.

Like racist ideas in general, the extreme racism of the far right has always been closely linked with other ideological discourses. In the case of Southern racism the link with nationalism and populism has always been pronounced. The combination of all three was central to the relative success of George Wallace's political campaigns in the 1960s as well as the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan in recent years. The ability of the left to rearticulate populism and nationalism in a new way, separating them from, and turning them against racism, therefore, becomes a key part of the process of undermining the ideological legitimacy of the Klan and the far right forces associated with it.

“Downplaying” the Democratic Struggle

Historically there has been a certain amount of suspicion on the part of many leftists of participation in the democratic struggle. In some cases this feeling is the result of a fear that involvement in democratic struggles will keep people from becoming revolutionary, that they will become enamoured of “sham” bourgeois democratic rights and bourgeois democracy. Long ago Lenin opposed this type of “ultra-leftism”:

It would be a radical mistake to think that the struggle for democracy was capable of diverting the proletariat from the socialist revolution or of hiding, overshadowing it, etc. On the contrary, in the same way as there can be no victorious socialism that does not practice full democracy, so the proletariat cannot prepare for its victory over the bourgeoisie without an all-round, consistent and revolutionary struggle for democracy.⁶³

In addition to “ultra-leftism,” another political error has led sections of the Marxist movement to downplay the importance of the broad democratic struggle against racism. This error, *workerism*, disregards the democratic struggle while concentrating solely on the narrower question of a class specific strategy of winning white workers to the struggle against racism.

Workerism in the conditions of the United States has historically been founded on two propositions. First, upon a flawed and economist theory of class analysis by which virtually the entire US population is defined as workingclass.⁶⁴ This result enables the proponents of workerism to disregard the central issue of Marxist political strategy—namely the means by which the workingclass wins allies for itself among other classes and class fractions in the political struggle. Workerists instead preoccupy themselves exclusively with the proletariat, treating it as a monolithic and homogeneous entity. Second, workerists, if forced to

admit the need for workingclass allies, nonetheless argue:

in any case, the workingclass, by virtue of its place in production and its specific forms of organization, stands “spontaneously” at the head of the revolutionary process.⁶⁵

Workerism in the battle against racism leads to a partial and non-dialectical view of the nature of this struggle, conceiving it in narrow class terms, entirely as a means of achieving working class unity, as if a united workingclass and anti-racist consciousness are, *by themselves*, all that is needed for capitalism's downfall.

At the same time, because workerism reduces the antiracist movement to the workers' struggle for class unification, the *autonomy* of the broad anti-racist struggle is liquidated, and reduced to just another aspect of the class struggle. This can take the obvious form of defining opposition to racism as class struggle or it can also take a more subtle form, that of liquidating the class differentiation within the black community. By thereby defining blacks as a racially oppressed section of the working masses, and ignoring the black bourgeoisie and those sections of the community which perform political and ideological functions for capital, a “neat fit” between class oppression and racial oppression is made which obviates the need for a broad democratic struggle against racism independent of the workers' struggle. Not only does this view hinder the full development of the anti-racist struggle, it also fails to understand the political and ideological contradictions in the black community which are the product of the class divisions within it, divisions which strongly affect all black political and ideological consciousness.

Whatever the form, workerism leads to seeing the fight against racism entirely from the perspective of how it shapes the workingclass, primarily the *consciousness* of white workers, upon which the fate of the US revolution is said to rest. The error which emerges here is *reductionism*: racism is seen as so essential to the maintenance of capital that it becomes virtually the only obstacle standing between the white workers and revolution: “As soon as white supremacy is eliminated as a force within the workingclass, the decks will be cleared for action by the entire workingclass against its enemy.”⁶⁶

A Multiplicity of Determinations

The problem with this approach goes beyond the error of failing to see that a revolution is not made by workers' consciousness alone. The approach also fails to take into account the complexity of the ideological conditions necessary for the reproduction of capitalism. As noted above, capitalist institutions and practices function to produce a multiplicity of beliefs and discourses, of which racism is only one. While inter-locking, these discourses are relatively autonomous and have relatively autonomous conditions of existence and reproduction. The defeat of one will not *automatically* lead to the defeat of others, and capitalism itself does not survive or fall on the basis of one ideology alone.

The white workingclass (or any other class or class fraction) is not constituted as subjects within the capitalist

system by a single ideology, but by a *multiplicity of ideological determinations*, including racism. The elimination of racist beliefs as a significant force in the consciousness of white workers and the relationships within the workingclass which reproduce them, would remove a key obstacle to the constitution of a united workingclass. But the ideologies which keep the masses divided, without class and political consciousness are many: sexism, national chauvinism, individualism, trade union consciousness, etc. The elimination or transformation of the structures which reproduce them and their resulting discourses require specific struggles as well.

Just as it is an error to think that the struggle against racism can be correctly waged when it is channeled into the narrower confines of the workers' struggle, so too it is an error to think that the other ideological obstacles to the constitution of revolutionary subjects in the United States will disappear or lose their significance *automatically* as a result of the struggle against racism. Combatting racism is central to any revolutionary strategy in the United States. Recognizing this fact does not mean, however, that we should attribute revolutionary significance to this process *in and of itself*, seeing it as the magic key to open the door to revolution. *Whether or not fighting racism takes on a revolutionary significance depends on how this struggle is conducted and how it is linked to the other political and ideological struggles of the masses.*

That is, there is no guarantee that the workingclass, having abandoned racist ideas, will spontaneously see the correctness of class unity and political struggle and begin to fight capital on that basis. The ideological struggle must go beyond critiquing the dominant ideologies; it requires the creation of new discourses, practices and institutions which are capable of constituting new class and political subjects *in an all-sided way*. Ultimately this means creating a new popular democratic ideology.

The error of seeing any one ideology as indispensable to the maintenance of capitalism, even racism, also leads to an incorrect assessment of the potential of the anti-racist struggle. If capitalism *needs* racism in order to survive, then the struggle against racism is either doomed to failure as long as capitalism continues, or it is a diversion from the main (class) struggle against capitalism, the fall of which *alone* will bring about the elimination of racism. In either case the vital and indispensable nature of the struggle against racism is sacrificed.

In the same way that it is said that capitalism needs racism, it is also sometimes said that socialist revolution is the *solution* to the problem of racism. Rather, socialist revolution should be seen as an important new *beginning* in the struggle against racism. Socialism can provide the means with which to eliminate the economic, political and ideological conditions of existence of racism, but insuring that these means are actually put to use, and the discourses, practices and institutions perpetuating racism are disrupted and dismantled, can only come through continuing this ideological struggle throughout the transition period.

Anti-Racism and the Workers' Movement

If it is a mistake to downplay the broad democratic struggle against racism, it is equally an error to remain

indifferent to the specific requirements of fighting racism in the workingclass. If the former error seeks to reduce all anti-racist struggles to workers' struggles, the latter leads to the view that the general social struggle against racism will *by itself* overcome the specific divisions between white and black workers. Neither approach is correct, for the left needs a political-ideological strategy which operates on both terrains. The broadest possible mass multi-class movement against racism must be developed at the same time that a specific struggle must be waged within the workingclass against the inequalities which divide white from black workers, and the racist ideas which are reproduced by these inequalities.

Having examined the democratic struggle against racism above, it is necessary to turn to the specifics of the struggle within the workingclass. To understand the economic, political and ideological divisions within the workingclass which provide the material basis for racism, it is first necessary to understand the heterogeneous nature of the workingclass and the effects of the uneven development of its various parts on the class as a whole.

It is a general principle of Marxism that homogeneous classes do not exist. Every class, including the workingclass, is marked by a multiplicity of divisions. In the American workingclass these include divisions based on race, sex, national origins, age, regional differences, degree of organization, etc., as well as the differences which are created by the nature of the capitalist labor process as a whole. Different sections of the class, as a result of their numbers, their geographical location, their ties to other sections of the class and the community, and their control over their labor and/or the labor market, have been better able to defend and advance their interests than other sections of the class. These other sections, handicapped by their numbers, their relative isolation, language barriers, etc., or the stigma of distinct social oppression (racism, sexism, etc.) have fared less well. The results have been that *material differentials* of a systematic and structural nature have developed between sections of the workingclass. One of the most important of these systems of material differentials is that based on race which divides white from black workers.

The material differentials which divide workers on the basis of race have their origins in two inter-related processes. Most generally they are the product of the totality of class and social struggles in US society. The general structures of racist discrimination which are the product of social struggles throughout society produce determinate effects in the workplace itself. White workers carry advantages of racism with them into the factory and the trade union, just as black workers cannot leave their burden of discrimination behind.

At the same time, however, racial divisions within the workingclass are the product of distinct workingclass struggles at the point of production. Not that all gains of white workers were won solely to protect white advantages, or even less that the relatively better condition of white workers is some kind of gift "bestowed" on them by capital.⁶⁷ The major concessions won by workers in struggle over the last 100 years—the right to organize, job security, decent wages, the shorter work day—were not seen as white prerogatives by those who fought for them. "The principle of

seniority rights was fought for by Black workers as well as white workers.”⁶⁸

Class struggle, however, is a constant battle which continues to shape a gain or a victory long after it is “won.” Michael Aglietta, in his study of the development of the US economy, comments on how the victory represented by the winning of recognition by the new unions of the CIO subsequently turned into its opposite. The industrial unionism of the 1930s threatened to conduct class struggle in a truly mass way at the same time that it contained the potential of developing into its own political movement. By the time of Taft-Hartley and the AFL-CIO merger, labor’s political independence was killed and economic class struggle was channeled into the increasingly narrow and bureaucratic limits of collective bargaining.⁶⁹ The same, or similar things happened to the seniority system, and other gains. In many cases it was easy for capital to modify certain gains to give them a racially discriminatory effect because of the labor movement’s traditional indifference to the needs of black and other minority workers.

In the end the dominance of racism in American society, linked with the relatively less favorable position of blacks in jobs at all levels of the economy, and the failure of the labor movement to adequately protect their interests, have all contributed to creating and maintaining the system of material differentials between blacks and whites. It is chiefly this system which reproduces the discourse of racism within the workingclass and which must be specified and attacked in any strategy for the struggle against racial oppression. All efforts to find some other cause for the racism prevalent in the white workingclass—to isolate its source in the labor aristocracy, or in “bribes” paid from “imperialist superprofits”—fundamentally miss the point. Even if these factors do have an effect on the reproduction of racism, they only do so because the pre-existing system of material differentials between whites and blacks provides the structural framework within which they are able to operate.

Differentials and Advantages

It is generally recognized that, in an absolute sense, racism, by dividing the workingclass and helping to block the development of its class and political consciousness, does not benefit white workers. It is also often noted that racism, by dividing the workingclass, prevents it from fighting consistently in a united way for economic improvements, and thus does not economically benefit white workers. But to stop here is not enough; it fails to explain *how ideology works*. Regardless of whether or not in some absolute sense racism is not in the interest of white workers, at the level of *immediate appearance* (where this kind of ideology works best), the white worker “sees” that he is *relatively* better off than the black worker because he is white. These relative material advantages of whites in relation to blacks are the material basis of the reproduction of racist ideas in the workingclass.

Analyzing these advantages more closely, however, we begin to see that they, and the reasons why white workers hold on to them, have to do with more than just racism. The dominant ideology of the US workers’ movement is the ideology of narrow “bread and butter” trade unionism. Within the limits of this ideology the advantages of white

workers are seen (correctly) as the product of a history of trade union struggles, a product which can be lost and which must be defended. Racism enters the picture when it attributes these advantages to biological, racial or cultural factors, or when it rejects the struggle to extend these advantages to blacks for similar reasons. In both cases racism is a part of the struggle of whites to defend their advantages, but it is not the entire picture. Instead, for the bulk of white workers racism must not be seen in isolation from, but rather as a part of the dominant ideology of the workers’ movement within which it functions. Racism and narrow trade union consciousness are compatible and mutually reinforcing in several respects vis-a-vis capital. Racism, by constituting individuals as *racial* subjects ties white workers to their oppressors by a common “whiteness.” In this manner, like narrow trade union consciousness, it blocks the constitution of *class* subjects and hinders the constitution of workers as independent *political* subjects (independent of capital).

“Repudiating White Skin Privileges”

Here is where the impossibility of the “white skin privilege” line as a strategy for combatting racism becomes apparent. The proponents of this theory reduce the totality of ideological determinations in the shaping of the consciousness of the workingclass to one: racism. As a result, their strategy for fighting racism fails to take into account the aspects of trade union consciousness we have been discussing. The strategy of the “white skin privilege” line, asking white workers to “repudiate” their “privileges,” has been summarized as follows:

The white workers will not “lose” substantial benefits by rejecting favoritism for whites; rather they “lose” the preferences imposed upon them by the bourgeoisie, and with them, the heaviest shackles which bind the labor movement to bourgeois consensus, to petty-bourgeois reformism, and to the Democratic Party. That is, the white workers will “lose” the social nature of their “whiteness”—their monopoly of certain skilled trades, their *relatively* better housing and social services—but *gain* as members of a revolutionary class the power to extract real concessions for the class as a whole and, most importantly, to fight for socialism.⁷⁰

The problem with this approach as a *strategy* for fighting racism goes beyond its incorrect analysis of the historical development of the advantages of white workers. What is really involved here is a failure to see how the complex totality of workingclass ideology, including racism and the narrow “bread and butter” mentality of trade unionism, is a mutually reinforcing system. To only see racism in isolation, outside of this system, is to fail to see the totality which gives it a tenacious grip over the minds of white workers, justifying it while compelling white workers to hold on to the advantages they enjoy. As long as white workers approach the issue of racism from this ideological framework, it makes no sense for them to give up their hard-earned gains, such as better housing and social services: that is what the trade union struggle is all about. And it certainly makes no sense from this perspective to give these things up in order to gain the power “to fight for socialism,” which presumes an

entirely different kind of consciousness.

In short, the correct approach cannot be a one-sided struggle against racist ideas which fails to take into account the entire system of ideological determinations which support and reinforce racism in the workers' movement. *By itself* it is never enough to ask white workers to give up the things they have fought for, the only things their present trade union ideology has taught them are worth fighting for. Sometimes it is essential to struggle with white workers around the abandonment of specific advantages (seniority rights, affirmative action programs), but these struggles should always be conducted in the context of an all-sided ideological effort. This does not mean counterposing to trade union consciousness a revolutionary consciousness, as the "ultra-left" has tried to do. It does not mean finding the way to draw white workers into economic, political and ideological struggles in which they will initially learn that *no gain is truly secure as long as it is a gain for only a part of the class*. From these struggles the workers will also learn to fight for different things, and, in the process, learn to fight for them in a new class conscious and political way, as new *class and political subjects*, thereby shedding their old ideology in the process; if, and only if, these struggles are correctly conducted and their political significance is successfully drawn out.

Fighting racism in this way means skillfully combining the *general struggles of the workers* with the *indispensable struggle against material differentials based on race*. In the course of this struggle, not only will white workers begin to think of themselves differently, but the joint struggle of whites and blacks will help overcome the historical separations which have resulted from and reinforced the differentials. How to struggle against the differential—at what pace, with what demands, etc.—cannot be decided without knowledge of the concrete situation, such as the history of the particular shop or other workplace, the degree of unionization, etc.⁷¹ If the "how" of this struggle depends on specific local conditions, the "why" is never in doubt: to forge the workingclass into a political class vanguard of the popular-democratic bloc against capital.

Constituting New Workingclass Subjects

As discussed in Part II of this paper, the constitution of subjects is the function of ideology and ideological practice. The historically developed, inter-related systems of bourgeois ideologies have constituted the US workingclass as a multi-fragmented body of racially and sexually defined individuals without a developed class consciousness, and politically predisposed to be passive supporters of the bourgeois political parties. A specific ideological struggle is required if the workingclass is to be transformed into a vanguard force for social change. It is not enough for the workers to become united around, and conscious of workingclass issues alone, they must also become united in the struggle against all political and social oppression. In Lenin's words:

Workingclass consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to all cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse,

no matter *what class* is affected—unless they are trained, moreover, to respond from a Social Democratic viewpoint and no other.⁷²

In short, we must see the ideological task before revolutionaries as a two-fold one, participating in the activities of the workers and oppressed so as to facilitate their two-fold ideological reconstruction: as class subjects, and as new political subjects. In this framework the importance of the struggle against racism is given its true significance. By taking up the struggle against all manifestations of white supremacy, the workingclass can simultaneously strike at one of the central ideological mechanisms which block its *class* unification and its ability to *politically* respond to the system's oppression.

The development of workingclass unity and consciousness is important for the effective struggle against the material differentials and the continuing structural divisions within the class. It is also important for bringing into the society-wide struggle against racism a decisive class power, which will not only contribute over all to the success of that struggle, but will also aid the specifically proletarian component of that struggle to establish and develop its hegemony within it. Finally, a politically advanced and united workingclass movement, active in the political/social terrain of struggle will be obliged, in the very process of struggle, to forge material links with the movement for black liberation, the women's movement, etc. These links can lay the basis for the eventual formation of a national-popular bloc against capital. When the workingclass takes up the struggle against racism politically, it will have taken the first step on the road to revolution.

Black Oppression and the National Question

Traditionally, Marxist theoretical work on black oppression has been conducted within the framework of the theory of the national question, originally developed in Europe at the turn of the century to deal with the phenomenon, then common in Europe, of several nations co-existing within a single state (Austro-Hungary, the Russian Empire, etc.).⁷³ According to this theory the history of the various peoples of the world was the history of either their development into their own nation or their assimilation into another nation. Every people could, therefore, be defined in terms of how far they had developed on the road to nationhood, and their political rights were determined accordingly. Thus nations were accorded the right to self-determination; "pre-nations" were not. For a period of thirty years (1929-1959) the Communist Party, USA considered US blacks to be a nation in the deep south (see appendix). Today many Marxists still consider blacks to be a nation, either in the South or throughout the country. For still others blacks are a national minority, or a nationally oppressed people.

We think it is necessary to reject this view which insists that the only form of development of a people must proceed either through assimilation or nation-building. Clearly the history of the Jewish people scattered throughout the world cannot be reduced to assimilation or national formation. (This should not be confused with the different question of

the evolution of an *Israeli* nation in Palestine.) We therefore reject the uncritical application of the historically developed national question approach to US blacks, whose history has unfolded in the context of the emerging US nation-state, as insufficient to take into account the specificity of that process. Just as the oppression of black Americans is distinct from and cannot be reduced to class oppression, it is equally incorrect to try to explain the specificity of black oppression by reference to the phenomenon of national oppression to which it equally does not correspond.

Some Initial Definitions

In place of the "national question" framework, an alternative approach is necessary, one which will situate black oppression in the context of developing American capitalism, conceptualize its hierarchy of determinations, and grasp its relationship with class, sexual and other systems of oppression. While we do not claim to have elaborated this alternative we have found some initial definitions which we think are useful.

American blacks are an historically developed and relatively cohesive social and cultural community. *As a whole* they are oppressed by racism which is materially inscribed in institutions and practices whose *general* conditions of existence are provided by the capitalist social formation. In addition various sections of the black community suffer other distinct, if inter-related, forms of oppression. Black workers suffer *class* oppression, black women *sexual* oppression, etc. In this sense, all sections of the black community occupy positions and perform roles within US capitalism which are determined by the structure of class, racial and sexual determination. They are *united* by the racial oppression which they *share*, and *divided* by class and sexual oppression which separates them. No one of these determinations is reducible to the other, each has its own *specific* conditions of existence, and its own systems of production and reproduction. The failure to keep all of these relationships in mind can lead to serious political errors.

Black Oppression/Black Liberation

On the one hand, it would be an error to only see the factors which work to *unite* blacks. This error, frequently made by cultural nationalists, leads to a liquidation of the special oppression of black workers and black women, and to an underestimation of the political and ideological contradictions which result from the class differentiation in the black community. On the other hand, it would be an error to only see the aspects which *divide* the black community, an error frequently made by the "ultra-left." In this way the social base of the black liberation struggle is often unnecessarily narrowed to, for example, only black workers, and the issue of who should *lead* the black liberation movement is confused with the different issue of who should *be part of* that movement.

There are two other significant errors worthy of mention here, concerning the struggle over the conditions of existence of racism and racial oppression. One error,

prevalent on the right wing of the black liberation movement, restricts the struggle to only the *specific* conditions reproducing racism (discriminatory laws, exclusionary practices of employers, unions, etc.) and refuses to conduct struggle against the *general* conditions of existence within which racism develops: the economic, political and ideological structures of the capitalist system. The other error, which finds expression in the extreme left wing of the black liberation movement, places the entire emphasis on fighting *capitalism as such* and does not give sufficient attention to the requirements of the struggle against specifically racial forms of oppression. While the first error is based on the illusion that racism can be eliminated without a struggle against the general features of the capitalist system within which it flourishes, the second error is based on the view that blacks (particularly black workers) should directly take on capitalism, rather than be "diverted" into the democratic struggle against racism.

In fact, any necessary strategy for black liberation must take into account all these factors in their relative hierarchy of importance. Stated as schematically as possible, such a strategy must bring together the broadest array of forces possible in the black community (and its allies) so that the struggles against each of the structures of oppression which oppress black people (racial, class, sexual, etc.) can be combined into an all-sided and mutually reinforcing whole. The way this mass struggle for black liberation develops will have important political effects, not only in the black community, but also on the anti-racist struggle and the political struggle for black-white unity against capital.

The Dialectic of Race and Class

Historically, Marxism has recognized the general principle that class is the decisive determinant of social forces in any capitalist social formation. At the same time, American Marxists have generally come to recognize the tremendous effects which racism and racial oppression have had on all classes of this society. The problem always has been how to connect these understandings, how to specify the unique and complex dialectic of race and class in the history of the United States. The character of the articulation of race and class in the black community was mentioned above in the discussion of the problems which unite/divide it. We will return to this issue later on, but first it is necessary to discuss this articulation in terms of the relationship between the black liberation movement and the workers' movement, and the political consequences which flow from it.

Although the majority of blacks and whites in the United States share a relationship of subordination to capital, because of the specific effects of racial oppression, the character of that subordination is fundamentally different. Any effort to forge a common strategy must take into account the specificity of this difference in the demands set forth, in the forms of organization and in their internal relations. In any event, the struggle for black liberation cannot be reduced or subordinated to the workers' movement; it is a distinct, autonomous movement of its own which is indispensable for the solid unity of blacks suffer whites in any popular-democratic struggle against capital.

At the same time, however, although *all* blacks suffer

racial oppression, blacks in different classes experience the effects of racism differently. The struggle for black liberation cannot afford to ignore the class question or deny the effects of class on racial oppression. Economically and politically, different sections of the black community have different interests in the extent and character of the struggle for black liberation, and in deciding who the allies of this struggle should be. Thus the black liberation movement can only be a battlefield between conflicting classes in the black community, each understanding the goal and methods of the movement in terms of its own class interests. For this reason, the black liberation movement cannot be defined *beforehand* as "thoroughly anti-capitalist."⁷⁴ In fact, whether or not it *becomes* anti-capitalist will depend on which class ultimately leads it. If the black liberation struggle is conducted under the leadership of the black bourgeoisie, at best it will be limited to a general democratic struggle for reforms, without challenging capitalism itself. If, however, it develops under workingclass leadership, it indeed has the potential for becoming a central component of a popular democratic bloc against capital. Thus, the question of which class leads the black liberation movement is key, not only for its own future, but also for the future of its relationship with other forces, including the workers' movement.

In the broadest sense, all sections of the black liberation movement and the workers' movement have a common objective interest in pursuing the democratic struggle against racial oppression. But as soon as the struggle moves beyond the relatively limited terrain of democratic demands, the lack of common interests will make this alliance increasingly unstable. Of all the social forces involved, the black workingclass has the most consistent interest in conducting the black liberation struggle in a revolutionary manner, in continuing the struggle forward to socialism, and in forging a political alliance of all working people in the struggle against capital.

Black Workers Are Key

Understanding the class differentiation in the black community and its reflection in the black liberation struggle is essential to understanding the relationship of that struggle to the class struggle of the workers' movement. *And it is vital to understanding the central role of the black workingclass in the revolutionary process in the United States.* Those who fail to see that black people are members of various classes, including the workingclass, define the black liberation struggle without reference to these class dynamics. For them, the black liberation movement is nothing more than an ally of the workers' movement. This is the flip-side of the perspective which defines all blacks as oppressed workers and therefore defines the black liberation struggle, not as an ally but as an integral part of the workers' struggle, thereby denying its specificity and autonomy.

In fact, while the *entire* black liberation movement is objectively allied with the workers' movement, the black workingclass is not merely an ally, but *an integral part of that movement.* Now it becomes clear why the black workingclass is key to the revolutionary process in the United States. Black workers are pivotal because of their central place and necessary *role* in both the black liberation

movement and the workers' movement. On the one hand, they are the most numerous and exploited sections of the black community and have both the opportunity and historical role of providing hegemonic leadership to the black liberation movement. On the other hand, they are a central and vital component of the workers' movement, decisively located at the point of production and armed with a generally higher consciousness which comes from their oppression as both workers and blacks. Both this location and this consciousness provide them with the conditions from which to play a decisive role in the development of revolutionary leadership in the workers' movement. In short, not only do black workers occupy essential positions in both, but *they are the living bridge between these two great mass movements against capital,* and the decisive force in their coming together on revolutionary foundations. Of the necessity for the solid unity of these two movements and the pivotal role that this unification will play in the revolutionary process in this country there can be no doubt.

Epilogue

The present economic crisis of US capitalism and the reactionary austerity offensive unleashed in response to it, has brought all the brutal features of black oppression into sharp relief. In the second quarter of 1981 the black unemployment rate stood at 2.3 times the rate for whites, while in September it was officially announced that the unemployment rate for black teenagers exceeded 50%. Other figures from the third quarter of 1980 showed that the median weekly earnings of black men and black women were 75% and 58% of the earnings of white men.

Politically, the Reagan attack on governmental services and social programs is having a disproportionate effect on blacks, while his attack on affirmative action, the Voting Rights Act, and the refusal to pursue school desegregation are aimed directly at black America. And, if the Reagan administration's bellicose foreign policies, based on opposition to communism and national liberation, have drawn it increasingly closer to South Africa, its domestic policies and the rightists who have spearheaded them have made racism respectable again.

The inevitable protests to these developments are already underway, but they are largely spontaneous, uncoordinated and lacking either a broad base or experienced leadership. A revitalized, undogmatic and non-sectarian left is imperative as it could contribute mightily to furthering these struggles. Such a left could help to build the anti-racist movement, the workers' movement and the black liberation movement, and equally important, to building firm links among them, and the other mass movements of resistance. These are the tasks before us. We have a lot of work ahead.

Appendix

Two Comments on the Black Nation Thesis

Given the number of critiques of the Black Nation Thesis that have been produced in recent years,⁷⁵ we will not take up space here to repeat their arguments. We are in general

agreement with the *Critique of the Black Nation Thesis*, published by the Racism Research Project in 1975, which argues that US blacks are not and never were a nation. Rather than repeat their arguments we would like to touch on several points which have traditionally been neglected or denied in most of these critiques. These issues refer first to the theoretical foundation of the Black Nation Thesis and secondly to the process of its political imposition on the US Communist movement.

The major critiques of the Black Nation Thesis, while rejecting the conclusion that a black nation exists or existed in the South, nonetheless support the theoretical framework upon which that conclusion was based, namely Stalin's definition of a nation as presented in his 1913 essay, *Marxism and the National Question*.^{*} In point of fact, however, Stalin's essay was written as part of a general polemical campaign against the Jewish Social Democratic Bund and it is chiefly a polemical piece, rather than a theoretical one, Lenin's charitable comments notwithstanding.

Stalin's definition of a nation is inadequate for two sets of reasons. In the first place it utterly fails to theoretically specify the concepts which it uses: that is, their theoretical meaning as opposed to the way they are used in everyday language. What makes a territory or economic life "common"? What is "psychological make-up"? No small amount of the debates and arguments among supporters of the Black Nation Thesis result from their inability to arrive at a common definition of what they are talking about.

Secondly, Stalin presented his characteristics of a nation in the form of a list, simply stating that all four were necessary for the existence of a nation. At the same time he failed to explain what was really decisive, namely the actual inter-relationships between these factors which would produce a real existing nation. Members of the Racism Research Project have tried to get around this problem by saying that Stalin meant only that these characteristics were *necessary* for a nation, not that they were *sufficient*.⁷⁶ However, since the whole point of Stalin's essay was to provide a "serious and comprehensive discussion of the national question,"⁷⁷ it is hard to understand why Stalin neglected to discuss this problem concerning when necessary conditions become sufficient ones. Yet without it we do not have a dialectical understanding of the process of national formation, only a laundry list of factors. Given the initial theoretical weaknesses of the framework upon which the Black Nation Thesis was constructed, our critics of the Thesis are doing a distinct disservice to history by trying to shift all of the blame for its development onto those who only applied Stalin as best they could.

We now turn to the second question, the matter of how the Black Nation Thesis was imposed on the US Communist Movement. Before 1928 the Communist Party had traditionally considered the Afro-American question as that of a persecuted racial minority.⁷⁸ Two independent processes came together to impose the national question approach on the Communists in place of this line, one in the USSR, the other within the ranks of US Communists. The

^{*}"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."

Soviet process we are referring to was the two-line struggle within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Communist International between the Stalin group and the Bukharin group. The differences between these two tendencies as they relate to what concerns us here, the theory and practice of Communist Parties in the capitalist countries like the United States, can be illustrated with two quotations, both by J. V. Stalin.

The first quotation is taken from a *Pravda* article written by Stalin in 1927 when Bukharin was still head of the Comintern and Stalin still felt compelled to defend Bukharin's (and Lenin's) conception of the relationship between the Comintern and the member parties. Speaking in reference to China, Stalin said:

Notwithstanding the ideological progress of our Party, there are still . . . "leaders" of a sort in it who sincerely believe that the revolution in China can be directed . . . on the basis of the universally recognized general principles of the Comintern, *disregarding* the national peculiarities of China's economy, political system, culture . . . What in fact distinguishes these "leaders" from real leaders is that they always have in their pockets two or three ready-made formulas, "suitable" for all countries and "obligatory" under all conditions. The necessity of taking into account the nationally peculiar and nationally specific features of each country does not exist for them. [Stalin's emphasis]⁷⁹

Two years later, in 1929, after having Bukharin removed as President of the Comintern Stalin reversed himself and repudiated this stated position. In his speech before the American Commission of the Comintern Executive in which Stalin announced that hereafter all Communist Party leadership would unquestioningly submit to Comintern directives or be removed, he said:

It would be wrong to ignore the specific peculiarities of American capitalism. The Communist Party in its work must take them into account. But it would be still more wrong to base the activities of the Communist Party on these specific features, since the foundation of the activity of *every* Communist Party, including the American Communist Party, on which it must base itself, must be the *general features* of capitalism, which are the *same for all countries*, and not its specific features in any given country. [Emphasis added]⁸⁰

Having criticized Trotsky in 1927 for disregarding nationally specific conditions in guiding communist work, in 1929 Stalin adopted the same position. The American communists were not to base their work on the specific conditions in which they found themselves, but the general features which are the same for all countries. Thus the question of black oppression could now be safely "solved," with a ready-made formula of universal validity: the national question. Not only was a black nation "discovered" in the US South, but one was located in Oriente Province in Cuba as well. Having eliminated the significance of national differences in communist strategy the Stalin group insured that no communist party would ever have reason or excuse to deviate from the general line laid down by his Comintern leadership. In this way monolithic unity was imposed on the Communist International and on the Communist Party, USA.

The effort to impose the "national question" formula upon the issue of black oppression in this country was aided

by the sincere efforts of US black communists who were trying to come up with the appropriate response to the tremendous nationalist-minded popular upsurge which accompanied the Garvey movement. As Harry Haywood who led this process explains, he did not want to deny the legitimacy of black nationalism, yet without the actual existence of a black nation in the United States, he did not feel that a revolutionary nationalist alternative would be possible. Therefore the idea that a black nation existed in the South gave a material basis to black nationalism and thereby legitimated the ideology in Comintern eyes. Without a theory of ideological elements articulated in class ideological discourses, there appeared to be no other way to "legitimate" nationalist sentiments.⁸¹

Out of these two perceived necessities—one to impose an international uniformity on the Communist parties, the other to find a material basis for revolutionary black nationalism—the Black Nation Thesis was born. Its subsequent history cannot be gone into here, although we hope to have some discussion of it in a later article. In any case, the Thesis continued to dominate Communist thinking on this subject until 1959, when it was dropped by the Communist Party, only to be taken up again by the New Communist Movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

Notes

¹ Manning Marable, *Backwater: Historical Studies in Race, Class Consciousness and Revolution*. (Black Praxis Press, 1981) p. 6.

² Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production*. (RKP, 1975), pp. 156-57.

³ Hindess and Hirst, pp. 158-60.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁵ For an example of this view see Ken Lawrence, *Marx and American Slavery*. (STO, 1976).

⁶ *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 170, as quoted in Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (Verso, 1979). The first essay in Laclau's book contains an excellent refutation of the 'commodity production equals capitalism' view as expressed by Andre Gunder Frank in relation to Latin America.

⁷ John Harrison, "The Political Economy of Housework," *Bulletin of the Conference of Socialist Economists*. Vol. 4 (1973), p. 35.

⁸ For an excellent discussion of the stakes involved here see Stephen Katz, *Marxism, Africa and Social Class: A Critique of Relevant Theories*. (Centre for Developing Area Studies, McGill University, 1980).

⁹ See Marx's writings collected in *On America and the Civil War*. (McGraw-Hill, 1972).

¹⁰ Katz, pp. 57-60. Note also that the concept of articulation implies that the dominant mode of production is modified by the effects of the reproduction of the subordinate mode.

¹¹ Hindess and Hirst, pp. 125-29.

¹² See the Special Issue on Uneven Regional Development, *Review of Radical Political Economics*. Vol. 10, No. 3 (Fall, 1980).

¹³ Quoted in Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*. (Verso, 1978), p. 86.

¹⁴ Mandel, pp. 87-88. Antonio Gramsci, "Some Aspects of the Southern Question," *Selections from Political Writings, 1921-1926* (International, 1978), pp. 441-62.

¹⁵ Joe Persky, "Regional Colonialism and the Southern Economy," *Review of Radical Political Economics*. Vol. 4, No. 5 (Fall, 1972), p. 71.

¹⁶ Wilson Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party*. (University of North Carolina Press, 1951), p. 229.

¹⁷ Jay R. Mandle, "The Plantation Economy and Its Aftermath," *Review of Radical Political Economics*. Vol. 6, No. 1 (Spring, 1974), pp. 34-35.

¹⁸ Jay Lovestone, "The Great Negro Migration," *Workers Monthly*. Feb. 1926.

¹⁹ Harold Baron, *The Demand for Black Labor*, (New England Free Press, 1972), p. 20.

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E. San Juan, Jr.

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The Promise of Eurocommunism by Carl Marzani, Lawrence Hill & Co. 1980. \$16.95 (paper \$8.95)

Carl Marzani has produced a lively, well written and informative book on how the Italian Communist Party (PCI) understands Eurocommunism and the transition to socialism in Italy. Marzani's enthusiasm for the Italian Communists and their strategy is unmistakable and infectious, but it can not rescue the book from the grave theoretical and political weaknesses which underlie its perspective.

Marzani extolls the positive features of Eurocommunism: its break with the sterile Soviet model of socialism and the mechanical application of the Soviet revolutionary model to advanced capitalist countries, and emphasizes the necessity of a socialist practice and strategy appropriate to the specific conditions of advanced capitalist countries. So far so good. But Marzani immediately gets into trouble when he tries to explain what exactly this new practice and strategy entails. The discussion of Gramsci and the Gramscian legacy is particularly weak. Marzani, following the trend among Italian Eurocommunists, tries to portray Gramsci as the first eurocommunist, and present PCI strategy as the neutral outcome of his work.

In fact, however, Eurocommunism has only partially grasped the revolutionary character of Gramsci's thought. Gramsci's strategy, the construction of proletarian hegemony, involved two inter-related aspects, the first which the PCI has grasped, while at the same time liquidating the second. For Gramsci, communist strategy required the construction of a broad bloc of oppressed classes and strata to counter bourgeois hegemony. Eurocommunism, by implementing this approach, has broken with the narrow class reductionism which has characterized much of the Comintern's strategic thinking. At the same time, however, Gramsci never neglected the other aspect: the central need for proletarian leadership within the bloc, that is, the need for a bloc organized around proletarian rather than bourgeois interests, practices and styles of work.

This is Eurocommunism's central flaw: it has constructed a national-popular bloc not around proletarian interests, but through the subordination of workingclass interests to

its petty-bourgeois and bourgeois "allies"; not through the construction of proletarian power and hegemony, but through an endless and debilitating series of behind-the-scenes parliamentary and governmental maneuvers; not by constructing a new workingclass consciousness and culture (so important to Gramsci), but by attempting to prove itself the most loyal defender of bourgeois order and stability. Marzani is not unaware of these serious criticisms leveled at the PCI both in Italy and abroad. Unfortunately, his polemic against these criticisms is relegated almost entirely to a response to an orthodox Trotskyist critique, (that of Ernest Mandel), rather than responding to what would have been more interesting and difficult—the criticism of the Italian extra-parliamentary left.

Finally, perhaps in frustration for the obvious theoretical advantages which Eurocommunism's critics have over its defenders, Marzani makes the astonishing comment: "Lenin's maxim, 'There can be no revolutionary movement without a revolutionary theory', has done considerable harm to human progress." (p. 81). The idea that a serious revolutionary movement can dispense with revolutionary theory is unworthy both of Marzani, whose own theoretical gifts are obvious from this book, and of Gramsci, whom he so admires.

by Richard Davis

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²⁰Ernest Mandel, *Long Waves of Capitalist Development*. (Cambridge, 1980).

²¹Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation*. (NLB, 1979), pp. 111-12.

²²Aglietta, p. 172.

²³Baron, pp. 26-27.

²⁴Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Politics of Upheaval*. (Houghton-Mifflin, 1960), pp. 431-32.

²⁵James A. Geschwender, *Class, Race and Worker Insurgency*. (Cambridge, 1970), p. 24.

²⁶On blacks and the labor movement generally see: Julius Jacobson, ed. *The Negro and the American Labor Movement*. (Anchor, 1968).

²⁷Geschwender, p. 29.

²⁸William J. Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race*. (University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 69.

²⁹Baron, p. 29.

³⁰William A. Nolan, *Communism versus the Negro*. (Regnery, 1951), pp. 160-61.

³¹Doxey Wilkerson in *Political Affairs* (July 1945), p. 620, quoted in Nolan, p. 164.

³²Geschwender, p. 39.

³³Baron, p. 32.

³⁴Marable, p. 116.

³⁵Mandle, p. 41.

³⁶Wilson, p. 93.

³⁷Robert Hill, "The Illusion of Black Progress," *The Black Scholar* Vol. 10, No. 2 (Oct. 1978), p. 21.

³⁸Mandel, *Long Waves*, p. 27.

³⁹Hill, p. 49.

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Because dogmatism blocks the forward development of theory and the independent (independent of political expediency) elaboration of Marxism-Leninism to concrete conditions, theory loses its scientific character. It becomes more and more a non-scientific orthodoxy whose principle aspect is a dogmatist method and a static conceptual framework. By means of this domination, dogmatism acts to envelope and transform the revolutionary discoveries of Marx and Lenin, which remain within it, into harmless and abstract ideas divorced from the actual political and ideological practice of the communist and workers' movements.

A major aspect of this dogmatism is the failure to analyze, elaborate and rectify the fundamental tools of Marxist analysis. In typically *empiricist* (q.v.) fashion, analysis usually consists of merely "applying" *Marxist-Leninist theory* (q.v.) to concrete conditions. The assumption here is that Marxist-Leninist theory is a fully understood and complete body of principles which is imposed on material reality. As Bettelheim states: "Saying that theory is 'complete' means no longer permitting anything but commentaries on it, and thus means putting forward a metaphysical proposition which forbids any elaboration or further research. It means trying to sterilize theory and cause it to wither, for if theory fails to advance it must retreat." [Sources: Charles Bettelheim, "The Great Leap Backward," *Monthly Review*, July-August, 1978, p. 82 (As cited in *TR* No. 8); Ann Arbor Collective (ML), 1976, "Against Dogmatism and Revisionism: Toward a Genuine Communist Party," *TR* No. 20, p. 27 (Hereafter, "Toward a Genuine . . ."); Tucson ML Collective, "Party Building Tasks in the Present Period: On Theory and Fusion," 1977, p. 3 (Hereafter, "Theory and Fusion"); Scott Robinson, "The Communist Movement and the Struggle Against Racism," *TR* No. 8, p. 28; Paul Costello, "Anti-Revisionist Communism in the United States, 1945-1950," *TR* No. 11, p. 17; Paul Costello, "Party Building: Our Aim is True," *TR* No. 12, p. 5.]

ECONOMISM *Economism* is the view that the development of the productive forces, not the *class struggle* (q.v.) is the driving force in history. Economism transforms what Marx had seen as a possible outcome of class struggle into an economic inevitability. The historical tendency toward a crisis resulting from the contradiction between production forces and production relations was transformed into an inevitable law of nature by "economists." The centrality of class struggle at all levels of a *social formation* (q.v.) in the overthrow of capitalism was replaced by the centrality of an inevitable economic breakdown.

For revolutionary Marxism, the economic collapse of capitalism is in no sense inevitable, nor by any means will it come from a contradiction at the economic level alone. The economic tendencies of capitalism act against each other, some to fetter the productive forces, others to develop them. In no sense do production relations act as an absolute block to expansion of the productive forces. Finally, no matter what favorable conditions the economic contradictions produce, it is only when they are reinforced by political and ideological conditions, and acted upon by the class struggle of the masses and the conscious activity of communists that

the possibility of revolution exists.

Economism reduced the other levels of the social formation to a mere "expression" of the economy, and the social contradictions at all levels of an "expression" of the contradictions between forces and relations of production. In the end class struggle, too, becomes either a secondary characteristic and/or itself an expression of economic forces.

An economist deviation is characterized by an overemphasis on the economic level. That is, it is assumed that once the economic level has developed, once the forces of production have developed, the superstructure will more or less automatically follow along. Thus, economists look to the economic level as the dominant factor, regardless of the *conjuncture* (q.v.). [Sources: Paul Costello, "Stalin and Historical Reality," *TR* No. 8, p. 17; Paul Costello, "Leninist Politics and the Struggle Against Economism," *TR* No. 15, pp. 5-6; Harry Eastmarsh, "Analyzing China Since Mao's Death," *TR* No. 16, p. 29.]

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⁴⁰Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy* (MR, 1971); Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism* (RKP, 1977); Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (Verso, 1979); Goran Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (Verso, 1980).

⁴¹On economism see the Glossary elsewhere in this issue. On instrumentalism see "Capitalism, the State and Crises," in *TR* No. 20 (Jan.-Feb. 1981). On class reductionism see Laclau, pp. 100-111.

⁴²The (in)famous line of the Progressive Labor Party beginning in the late 1960s.

⁴³Coward and Ellis, p. 72.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁵Therborn, p. 18.

⁴⁶Althusser, p. 162.

⁴⁷Laclau, pp. 100-111.

⁴⁸For an interesting discussion of this question see Manning Marable, pp. 93-128.

⁴⁹Michael Banton, *Race Relations* (Basic Books, 1967), p. 8.

⁵⁰Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made* (Vintage, 1971), p. 150.

⁵¹Michael Banton, *The Idea of Race* (Tavistock, 1977), pp. 19-24.

⁵²Genovese, p. 105.

⁵³Robert L. Allen, *Reluctant Reformers* (Anchor, 1975), pp. 264-65.

⁵⁴Banton, *Race Relations*, p. 125.

⁵⁵Allen, p. 276.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 289.

⁵⁷Marable, pp. 93-128.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 156-61.

⁵⁹"Toward a Contemporary Strategy: Lessons of the 1930s," in *TR* No. 21 (Mar.-April, 1981).

⁶⁰Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 23, pp. 24-25.

⁶¹Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, *The Woman Question* (International, 1951), p. 82.

⁶²Gideon Ben-Tovim, "The Struggle Against Racism: Theoretical and Strategic Perspectives," *Marxism Today* (July, 1978).

⁶³Lenin, *The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, Second Thesis.

⁶⁴Against this view see Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (Verso, 1978); Erik Olin Wright, "Class Boundaries in Advanced Capitalist Societies," *New Left Review* No. 98 (July-Aug. 1976).

⁶⁵Charles Bettelheim, *Class Struggles in the USSR*, Vol. II.

⁶⁶Theodore Allen and Noel Ignatin, *White Blindspot*.

⁶⁷Roxanne Mitchell and Frank Weiss, *A House Divided: Labor and White Supremacy* (United Labor Press, 1981), p. 113.

⁶⁸Sojourner Truth Organization, *White Supremacy and the National Question* (STO, 1976), p. 29.

⁶⁹Aglietta, pp. 190-98.

⁷⁰Mitchell and Weiss, pp. 115-16.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 97.

⁷²Lenin, *What is to be Done?*

⁷³Horace B. Davis, *Nationalism and Socialism* (MR, 1967).

⁷⁴Linda Burnham and Bob Wing, "Toward a Communist Analysis of Black Oppression and Black Liberation," *Line of March* (2,1) (July-Aug. 1981), p. 27.

⁷⁵Racism Research Project, *Critique of the Black Nation Thesis* (1975); Robert L. Allen, "Racism and the Black Nation Thesis," *Socialist Review* No. 27 (Jan.-March, 1976); Burnham and Wing, *op cit*.

⁷⁶Racism Research Project, pp. 6-7.

⁷⁷Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question* (1913).

⁷⁸Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik* (Liberator, 1978), p. 229.

⁷⁹Stalin, "Notes on Contemporary Themes: China," Works, Vol. 9, pp. 338-39.

⁸⁰Stalin, *Speeches on the American Communist Party* (1929).

⁸¹Haywood, Ch. 8.

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the decided superiority of advanced Marxism over 1930s type dogma and its contemporary apologists.

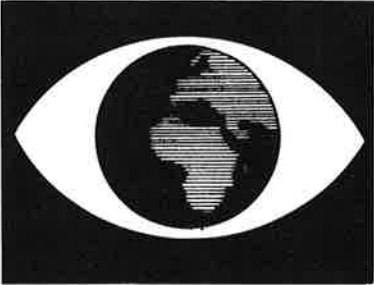
We have no intention of abandoning this practice. The test of theory is in its application: the production of knowledge and revolutionary politics. In this issue of the *Theoretical Review* we have applied our understanding of the contributions of Gramsci, Althusser, and others to the critical issue of racism and black oppression in the United States. While this is only a beginning analysis, we hope that it will stimulate discussion and debate among our readers and in the broader left community.

This issue also contains our regular column on popular culture, this time featuring a review-discussion of the current Clash album: *Sandinista!* Also included in this issue are a number of book reviews and the latest installment of the *TR* glossary.

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