The Russian revolution and black radicalism in the United States

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After the first world war, black radicals in the US created a new transnational politics of liberation

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> I hope that as a symbol that the Negroes of the world will not be used by the international bourgeoisie in the final conflicts against the World Revolution, that as a challenge to the international bourgeoisie, who have an understanding of the Negro question, we shall soon see a few Negro soldiers in the finest, bravest, and cleanest fighting forces in the world - the Red Army and Navy of Russia - fighting not only for their own emancipation, but also for the emancipation of all the working class of the whole world.
>
> Claude McKay, 'Report On The Negro Question', Moscow 1922[1]

For black radicals in the US, the Russian revolution in 1917 signified the hope for a new form of race/class politics, which could speak to questions of race, class and colonialism. They already saw themselves as radical internationalists: as Benjamin Balthaser argues, they understood race as a 'transnational term, linking slavery, colonialism, Jim Crow and capitalism into a single frame of analysis'.[2] Race was central to their understandings of capitalism, while the history and lived experience

of race were embedded in the lineaments of anti-capitalist resistance. This article argues that, in their responses to the Russian Revolution, African Americans, and Afro Caribbean migrants living in the US, created a new transnational politics of liberation, which had a significant impact upon race/class politics in the US in the following decades.

This is a contested history. Communist 'exploitation' of 'the Negro question' was denigrated for decades in cold war discourses; but more recently there have been more nuanced arguments about the genesis of these political formations.[3] However, in the centenary reflections on the Bolshevik revolution and its world-changing influence, the significance of the revolution for black radical politics has been marginalised. It seems that historians and commentators have found it difficult to understand the relevance of the Russian revolution - the fight of white, Russian, peasants and workers on the margins of Europe - for African Americans attempting to negotiate the horrors of US racism in the American South, or even those of the more industrial but institutionally racist North.

It is the assertion of this article, however, that the impact of the revolution on black radical thought in the US was immense; and that 'black bolshevism' inaugurated a very specific anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-capitalist politics, whose echoes can be seen in the black struggles that came its wake. This was a very important moment for the black radical claim on what a vision of liberation might mean when read through the prisms of class and race. And, though this claim still remains somewhat unfamiliar - in particular in the powerful connections it forged through its anti-colonial politics and reading of the black radical tradition - it is a claim that remains crucial, both for black politics and the wider society. For, in insisting that class politics is race politics and race politics is class politics, these radicals bequeathed us a valuable tradition that is particularly relevant a century later.

In our current moment, when perceptions of class and race are being bent out of recognisable shape as a means of justifying the rise of the reprehensible - when the working class is being whitened - the writings of these activists are a cogent reminder of a multi-racial and multi-cultural vision of liberation that insists on the centrality of black and brown labour to the making of the modern world. In both Europe and the US, the term 'white working class' has become not so much a dog whistle as a bull horn, as it is used by vicious neoliberal racists and their apologists in the service of a narrative of beleaguered white dispossession. The notion of the

white working class as a forgotten constituent in a mythical world of anti-racist multicultural exclusivity, mobilised to recruit conservative whites for right-wing populism, is dependent on a representation of working-class life and history as being separable on ethnic lines. But the arrant nonsense of such an idea is clear from the most cursory acquaintance with the complex confluences of race and class that have always structured the composition of the working class.[4]

Thus the black Bolshevism of the early twentieth century remains of crucial importance to anti-racist class politics, not least in that it underlines the imperative to insist on the history and contemporary reality of class as having no basis in ethnicity, nor any origin in specific racialised geographical spaces. The working class, as these radicals insisted, does not have a single root: it is produced through many routes.[5] Those routes are transnational, and they exist in the rich interconnections between the colonially oppressed and the wage-labour-exploited, including the wage-labour-exploited colonially oppressed - the majority of the global working class throughout capitalism. As Dubois famously expressed it in *Black Reconstruction*:

> The emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor and the emancipation of labor is the freeing of that basic majority of workers who are yellow, brown and black.[6]

This article will focus on the historical context in which early twentieth-century black radicalism emerged, and the ways in which it developed in relation to the Bolshevik revolution; its argument is that the ways in which the Bolshevik revolution was interpreted by black radicals in the US was key to their particular brand of anti-colonial, anti-racist, anti-capitalism. And the writings of the black activists who heralded the revolution as a prototype for a radical anti-racist class politics not only illuminate the impact of the revolution on this constituency: they also delineate a form of inter-racial class politics that was subsequently instrumental to the US Communist Party's anti-racist activities during the Depression. The relative success of the CPUSA in organising around issues of race in the 1930s is unimaginable without the rigorous interrogation of the dialectics of race and class that was undertaken by black radicals of the post-revolution period.

The New Negro

After the First World War, the term 'New Negro' was adopted by an emerging generation of black activists who were self-consciously seeking to delineate themselves from what they saw as the passive and assimilationist politics of earlier traditional black reformist movements and their 'servile, lick-spittle leaders'.[7] And this movement was part of the wider black response to a time of intense racial conflict in the US.

The decades leading up to the war had seen the migration of up to a million African Americans from the South to the industrial North, as well as the migration of tens of thousands of Afro-Caribbeans to the same Northern cities. These new black populations were greeted by extreme levels of racism. Thus, in 1917, in one of the most notorious acts of terror, a mob of East St Louis whites attacked the black area of the city and killed large numbers of people: the official death toll of 39 African Americans is widely regarded as deeply unreliable, in the face of the hundreds of known black casualties. And these shocking events were a grim augury of what was to come. The concern of the US state, however, was expressed in terms of a crackdown on the 'race riots' of the period. This was partly because they were alarmed that black Americans were for the first time starting to organise collective resistance to attacks on them by whites (though their acts of self defence caused disproportionately few white casualties).

The American federal authorities regarded African Americans as especially susceptible to Bolshevism. Indeed, the federal agencies became obsessed with the idea of Bolshevism taking hold in African American communities, as evidenced in a 1919 federal report entitled 'Radicalism and Sedition among the Negroes as Reflected in their Publications'. This fear was in part a racist response to renewed black militancy in the immediate post-war period: any expression of black liberation was immediately identified as stemming from the 'Russian disease'. Organisations that were far from socialist were viewed as dangerously sympathetic to Bolshevism - including the liberal reformist National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), founded by Marcus Garvey (who set up the first American division in 1917).[8]

In the Red Scare which gripped America in the wake of the revolution, African

Americans were seen as doubly suspect. As Robert Whittaker comments, the 'taint of Communism added yet another dose of poison to the image of blacks in the white mind'.[9] This understanding of all forms of black political agency in terms of Russian influence was indeed a distortion of the multifarious black politics that existed in this period; but it was also a recognition of the fact that many African Americans saw the Bolshevik revolution as an inspirational event.

The so-called Red Summer of 1919 saw a series of murderous attacks in over forty black communities in the USA, most famously in Chicago, Washington DC, Charleston, Omaha and Knoxville. And among the most militant within the black communities as they responded to this violence were black war veterans returning from their experiences in a Jim Crow army in Europe (President Wilson privately suggested that the 'American Negro returning from abroad would be our greatest medium in conveying bolshevism to America').[10]

This was the context for the resurfacing of the term 'the New Negro' - a term that had first emerged during the period of Radical Reconstruction immediately after the American Civil War. The New Negro sought to reframe the shape of 'race' politics, pushing at the limitations and slow pace of liberal reform. Here the impact of Caribbean migrants was considerable.[11] Though they were former subjects of empire, they confronted the ferocious racism they encountered with a level of disbelief, and this was quickly articulated within a transnational anti-colonial framework. One of the leading figures within this new movement was Hubert Harrison (1883-1927), a Caribbean migrant from the island of St Croix, and one of the most influential black radical socialists of the period preceding the Bolshevik revolution. Harrison was a powerful orator and prolific writer, and he perfectly encapsulated the times when he argued that African Americans were now 'making new demands on themselves, on their leaders, and on the white people'.[12] *The Emancipator* newspaper, edited by the gifted Jamaican emigrant W.A. Domingo (1889-1968), was also part of this movement. It explicitly described itself as:

> written for that constantly growing body of enlightened and upstanding men and women of our race - The New Negro who knows what true freedom is, and who wills to possess it.[13]

And the black socialist newspaper *The Messenger* - edited by American-born A.

Philip Randolph (1889-1979) and Chandler Owen (1889-1967) - also heralded the fact that 'a new Negro is rising who will not surrender or retreat a single step'.[14]

The vibrancy of the black radical milieu in the post-war US is indicated by the diverse and powerful versions of black liberation which emerged during this period. Of these, Garveyism is the most obvious example: at its height it boasted two million members in the US alone.[15] By comparison the embryonic black left was modest indeed, but its impact on contemporary politics was nevertheless considerable.

Despite the existence of significant political divergences, and the later vitriolic antipathy between Garvey and other black radicals and Communists, there is also evidence of co-operation between some black Socialists and Garveyites in the early years. This is attested to by the fact that seminal black socialists such as Harrison and Domingo penned articles for Garvey's *Negro World*; while socialist critiques of the fundamentally different vision of black liberation offered by Garvey were periodically moderated in a clear acknowledgement of the power of Garveyism in mobilising the African diaspora as never before. Of key importance here was the way in which Garvey's Pan-Africanism enabled a global vision of a black politics - one that was structured outside of the boundaries of the nation state. This had resonance for the black socialists and nascent communists of the era, who were also seeking an internationalist framework in relation to black liberation. This was part of the context for the significance of Bolshevism. As Michelle Stephens has argued, 'if the Bolsheviks could ground revolutionary identity not in the nation but in international proletarian solidarity, black subjects could strengthen their individual nationalist struggles and aspirations through international racial formations'.[16] Indeed, although Garvey's later anti-Communism is well known, in the wake of the 1917 revolution *Negro World* noted that it offered 'a breathing space to declare our freedoms from the tyrannical rule of oppressed overlords'.[17]

For black radicals of a more avowedly socialist persuasion, the revolution was a seismic event for race politics. But Bolshevism was not the only motivating force for the development of black Communism in the US. Indeed, it is the *shaping* of Bolshevism as relevant to the wider black radical tradition which is so interesting for this form of race/class politics - a politics which predated the events of October 1917.

The limitations of the white left in the US in relation to the 'race question' in the early decades of the twentieth century are renowned. With a few exceptions

(Isaac M. Rubinow, Robert Minor), there was no serious attempt to address race outside of a concept of class struggle in which race was made to disappear as a form of oppression. Although there were many impressive anti-racist activists (and the Wobblies are notable here), there was little attempt to *theorise* race, or to see class through the experience of black workers. The early pioneers of black socialism, notably Harrison - who until 1914 was a member of the Socialist Party - had attempted to shift this class reductionism, through challenging the colour-blind socialism which failed to recognise the particular oppression of black workers. Harrison insisted that 'the exploitation of the Negro worker is keener than that of any other group of white workers in America'; for him, the Socialist Party - whose mission was 'to free the working class from exploitation' - thus had a duty to 'champion his cause'. This, he argued, was 'the crucial test of Socialism's sincerity'.[18]

Thus the race/class politics of the New Negro helped give voice to black socialists during this period, while the Russian revolution offered them a new internationalist and anti-imperialism framework - and one that might make white socialists more receptive to their ideas.

Bolshevism and anti-colonialism

After leaving the Socialist Party in 1914, Harrison became a powerful pole of attraction for other black activists who were drawn to Marxism through the prism of race politics. These included Richard B. Moore (1893-1978), Otto Huiswoud (1893-1961), Grace Campbell (1883-1943) and W.A. Domingo, who studied the works of Marx and Engels in reading groups dedicated to applying their relevance to contemporary black life.[19] Harlem in particular was the site of feverish political activity amongst black radicals attempting to redress the limitations of the white left, and, perhaps more importantly, to forge a socialist politics which could mobilise black workers.

Formed in 1919 by Caribbean migrants to the US, the African Blood Brotherhood was an organisation whose aim was to extol race pride, anti-capitalism and militant black self-defence. According to its founding member Cyril Briggs (1888-1966), in a statement that was perhaps more aspirational than exact, this was a 'genuine working-class organization, composed of Negro workers, and with Negro-workers at the helm'.[20] Briggs, an emigrant from Nevis,

was a remarkable journalist and activist, whose journey from black nationalism to Communism can be traced in his writings - from his first writing job in 1912 for *The Amsterdam News* through to his position as editor of the black Communist newspaper *The Liberator* in the 1930s. Under his editorship, the ABB's journal, *The Crusader*, became the locus of a very strong avocation of black Bolshevism, alongside a frequently articulated pride in black achievement, history and culture. Bolshevism is the language of resistance and self-defence that the journal mobilises in the service of anti-colonial politics, not least because 'the right to self-determination of even certain weak and so called "backward" peoples in Asiatic Russia has been recognized by the Bolshevists'.[21]

It is the anti-colonial politics of the Bolsheviks that are trumpeted again and again by black radicals of the period as offering a model of liberation which placed anti-imperialism at the centre of its political programme. The Bolsheviks' commitment to self-determination for colonised peoples was enormously significant here, as was the response of the colonial powers to the revolution. As *The Emancipator* noted:

> England, with the blood of numberless Indians, Negroes, Egyptians and Irishmen upon her grasping, greedy hands, looks with nervous apprehension at the approach of Bolshevism to her Eastern Colonies.[22]

France and England are consistently cited as imperialist warmongers, while the US is seen as pathologically racist and hypocritical. Especially prominent in black radical publications were ironic citations of Woodrow Wilson's promise, on entering the Great War, to 'make world safe for democracy'; these appeared alongside articles presenting the reality of the United States as a place that consistently threatened black life - with denunciations of lynching, disenfranchisement and the soaring levels of black poverty. In contrast, Soviet Russia was presented as a place which was 'safe for Jews and other oppressed racial minorities'.[23] Indeed the status of the Jew in post-revolutionary Russia is a ubiquitous theme in the discussions about what Bolshevism had to offer black workers: it was argued that anti-Semitism was continually 'winked at and colluded in by the governments of every country except Bolshevik Russia'.[24]

The revolutionary black proletariat

Central to the politics of these black Bolsheviks was the insistence that African Americans were predominantly *workers*, that their historic role in the US from enslavement onwards had been as wealth creators, and that they thus had a powerful claim on proletarian status and identity. In 1917 Harrison argued that 'the ten million Negroes of America form a group that is more essentially proletarian than any other American group'. Moreover, not only were they proletarian, they were ideal revolutionaries, given that their level of exploitation imbued them with a potentially powerful level of class hatred:

> In every case that we know of where a group has lived by exploiting another group, it has despised that group which it has put under subjection. And the degree of contempt has always been in direct proportion to the degree of exploitation.[25]

African Americans, as descendants of the enslaved, were thus ideally placed in terms of responding to the class contempt which characterised capitalist exploitation. Frank Crosswaith (1892-1965), a trade union organiser from St Croix, noted in *The Emancipator* that 'wherever we find the Negro, we find him working for a living'; while *The Crusader* constantly reiterated that 'the Negro is essentially a worker'.[26] This determination to identify race with class - as opposed to subsuming race within class - was a challenge to the established, 'respectable', black reform movements as well as to the traditional left in the US. But these constant reiterations of the status of the African American as a worker did not exclude a profound acknowledgement of the virulent levels of racism that they faced from white workers. This was not a class politics which drew a utopian veil over the racism that infected the organised labour movement in the US, and there are few trite exhortations of interracial unity as unproblematic or automatic. While there are also instances of exasperated frustration at black workers' suspicion of socialism, especially in *The Messenger*, it was generally the case that anti-racism was regarded as the prerequisite to any gestures of inter-racial class solidarity, and the formidable nature of white supremacism was attested to at every turn. Claude McKay (1889-1948), the Jamaican writer and activist, and delegate to the fourth congress of the Communist International in 1922, maintained that black experiences of racism within the working class posed one of the greatest obstacles faced by black socialists and communists:

> The blacks are hostile to Communism because they regard it as a 'white' working-class movement and they consider the white workers their greatest enemy, who draw the color line against them in factory and office and lynch and burn them at the stake for being colored. Only the best and broadest minded Negro leaders who can combine Communist ideas with a deep sympathy for and understanding of the black man's grievances will reach the masses with revolutionary propaganda.[27]

It is this 'sympathy for and understanding of' the African American experience of racism which drives the class politics of black radicals in the US after the Russian revolution. And this goes well beyond McKay's insistence on 'combining' Communist ideas with anti-racist consciousness: it instantiates a politics wherein a black vanguard is necessary to challenge a capitalism that is racialised in both its current practices and its historic routes. Indeed, for these radicals racism is the most serious impediment to class struggle. In an article entitled 'Some disadvantages of being white', *The Messenger* argued that the white man is an 'intellectual slave', whose 'burden of artificial racial worth' consigns him to a 'life of blowing bubbles'. Moreover, those born white 'inherit all the odium' of imperialist and racist history; and thus, 'we are grateful that good fortune has spared us this mishap':

> The first great disadvantage of being white today, especially in America, is that it places one in a prejudiced environment and so makes it extremely difficult, in fact almost impossible, for one to maintain the 'scientific' attitude towards the facts of life whenever those facts touch the far flung, complex ramifications of race relationships.[28]

In addition to an undermining and lampooning of the claims of white supremacy, there is also here a valorisation of black anti-racist culture as having the capacity to nurture a bourgeoning class consciousness that is unhindered by the dregs of racist delusion. For black radical socialists of the period, it is the material conditions of racialised capitalism, and their expression in the lived experience of race, that disadvantage the African American subject. The black radical claim was that the white racist worker was presently unfit for the revolutionary task, and would remain

so while they clung to their 'ill-fated misfortune' (ibid).

This article on the invidious nature of white supremacy within the working class, written in 1928, is by no means the first voicing of black radical concern with racism in the American working class. Harrison, Briggs and McKay all wrote incisively about the obstacle that white supremacism presented to inter-racial class unity. For Harrison, any form of anti-racism which did not support black self-defence by any means necessary was a 'frightful friendship' - and one for which the 'Negro of America today does not care two pins'.[29] For his part, Briggs insisted that the 'acid test of friendship' is if a white person was 'willing even to see Negroes killing his own (white) people in defence of Negro rights'.[30] And McKay, too, was in no doubt about the task that faced black revolutionaries in the US, arguing that 'this racial question may be eventually the monkey wrench thrown into the machinery of American revolutionary struggle'.[31]

In stark contrast to American whites, Russian reds are presented as exemplars of anti-chauvinism, whose commitment to the revolutionary struggle of the international proletariat is evidenced in their perceived anti-Semitism and their support for self-determination in the colonies. But the internationalism that fired these black revolutionaries was not based solely on support for the global working-class struggle that the Bolshevik revolution would, it was hoped, inspire. It was also an internationalism that drew on the powerful diasporic imaginings of Garveyism, though replacing Garvey's dreams of a black empire with the alternative of a black radical commitment to anti-colonial politics. In placing the black worker as the vanguard of revolutionary struggle, this was a politics which placed race at the core of anti-capitalism:

> Since it is under the capitalist-imperialist system that Negroes suffer, we must boldly seek the destruction of that system, and to that end seek co-operation with such other forces, Socialism, Bolshevism or what not - that are engaged in war to the death with Capitalism.[32]

This is not to say that all the complexities of race and class in relation to the United States were - or could be - encompassed by these activists. Rather, it is to recognise that they laid claim to a politics of class which had hitherto marginalised black labour and black radical traditions (to say the least). My argument is that, although this

reclamation was to a considerable extent fired by the tumultuous events in Russia in 1917, it is not reducible to those events. These eclectic politics of liberation also emerged out of the growing black militancy in the black communities of the period, and the powerful models of black radical political identity that were repudiating liberal gestures towards racial 'reform'. In taking the promise of Bolshevism seriously, these activists inaugurated a vision of liberation that was premised on a multi-racial class politics of anti-colonial anti-capitalism, with a unique role to be played by black workers. But this was also a politics that simultaneously drew attention to the obstacles in realising this vision. These black Bolsheviks fought to give voice to a politics that would be adequate to the ambition of mobilising an international class movement that forefronted the racialised nature of capitalism itself.

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Notes

1. Claude McKay, 'Report On The Negro Question', Speech to The Fourth Congress of the Third Communist International, Moscow, 25 November 1922.

2. Benjamin Balthaser, *Anti-Imperialist Modernism: Race and Transnational Radical Culture from the Great Depression to the Cold War*, University of Michigan Press 2015, p16.

3. Important recent work includes, Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939*, University of North Carolina Press 2014; Holger Weiss, *Framing A Radical African Atlantic*, Brill 2013; Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism: the Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora 1919-1939*, Africa World Press 2013; and (forthcoming) Paul Heideman, *Class Struggle and the Color Line: American Socialism and the Race Question*, *1900-1930*, Haymarket 2018.

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11. Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth Century America*, Verso 1998.

12. Hubert Harrison, *When Africa Awakes* [1920], Black Classic Press 1996, p6.

13. *The Emancipator*, 13 March 1920.

14. *The Messenger*, May/June 1919.

15. Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat: Marcus Garvey*, Vintage 2009, pp163-4.

16. Michelle Stephens, *The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962*, Duke University Press 2005, p3.

17. *Negro World*, 27 March 1919.

18. Hubert Harrison, *The Negro and the Nation*, Cosmo-Advocate Publishing 1917, p22.

19. Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939*, University of North Carolina Press 2014, p39.

20. C. Lorenzo [Briggs], 'The Negro Liberation Movement', *The Toiler*, 10 December 1921. (Briggs wrote under the names C. Lorenzo and C.B. Valentine as well as in his own name.)

21. Cyril Briggs, 'Bolshevism's Menace: To Whom and to What?', *The Crusader*, February 1920.

22. *The Emancipator*, 13 March 1920.

23. W.A. Domingo, 'Did Bolshevism stop race riots in Russia', *The Messenger*, September 1919.

24. *The Messenger*, July 1919.

25. Harrison, *The Negro and the Nation*, p21.

26. *The Emancipator*, 20 March 1920; *The Crusader*, June 1919.

27. Claude McKay 'The Racial Question: The Racial Issue in the United States', *International Press Correspondence*, v. 2 (21.11.22), p817.

28. 'Some disadvantages of being white', *The Messenger*, 28 April 1928.

29. Hubert Harrison, 'Frightful Friendship Vs Self Defense', *Negro World*, 18 July 1921.

30. Briggs, *The Crusader*, July 1921.

31. Claude McKay, 'Birthright', *The Liberator*, August 1922.

32. *The Crusader*, August, 1921.