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What's so Marxist about Marxist Educational Theory?

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Abstract: The antagonism between "class" and "race" have plagued educational theory for decades. As a communist organizer seeking to move Marxist educational theory out of the stagnant waters of theoretical debates, I turn to recent CRT scholarship, which I find much more in line with the communist project. Yet, this literature omits world-historic and ongoing transformations inaugurated particularly since the beginning of the 20th century by erasing, discounting or, denouncing them. I argue the primary factors inhibiting educational researchers: Anticommunism. The global revolutionary era led largely by revolutionary communists contains the most fruitful explanations of those conditions and connections (and the historical legacies accounting for mass movements in the U.S. today, like the historic 2020 uprising against the War on Black America). This rich and dynamic legacy is what can get educational scholarship beyond the cages of academia. After outlining the interconnection between anticommunism and anti-Black racism as the contours of master narratives, I demonstrate how anticommunism continues to hold education's potential contributions to the struggle back while accounting for the material conditions responsible for the absence of revolutionary theory and practice and the overwhelming surplus of theories critical of revolution in the university today. I demonstrate how anti-Black racism in the U.S. is tethered to anticommunism and how Leninism provides the theoretical and practical link uniting the global struggle of the oppressed and creating the Black and indigenous-led communist movement, contending struggles against white supremacy, capitalism, and imperialism depend on a rejection of anticommunism by turning to Black communist Claudia Jones.

Keywords: Marx, class, education, Lenin, Critical Race Theory, Claudia Jones

Introduction: Reasserting the Horizon of Revolution and Liberation

The relationship or antagonism between academic theories of 'class' and 'race' continues plaguing educational research and theory, spawning endless debates, polemics, and attempts at synthesis. Most of the recent educational output focuses on the primacy or theoretical superiority of distinct educational theories of race or class, or strands of marxism and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Academic debates here tend to remain at a standstill. Consider the decades-long feud in Britain between Mike Cole's neo-marxism and David Gillborn's CRT. Cole's (2017: 16) primary critiques of Gillborn are 1) the use of 'white supremacy' as a conceptual framework that, he says, homogenizes all white people and renders race ahistorical and 2) the centrality of racism rather than capitalism 'as the primary form of oppression in society'. Cole maintains 'racialization' better accounts for the various ways racism and race form and moves beyond the Black-white binary and holds that, while it is 'massively racialized (and gendered)', capitalism depends 'on social class exploitation and reproduction for its very existence'. In one response, Gillborn (2015: 284) *leans into* Cole's critique, asserting the *primacy* of race empirically, personally, and politically, while clarifying such primacy means neither that 'racism is the *only* issue that matters' nor that 'it is *always* the most important issue'.

Not everything remains so divided in academic thought. Early on, David Stovall (2006: 257) proposed a 'ceasefire' because 'socialist critique and CRT can operate synergistically, while providing necessary analysis and practice'. More recently, in an introductory essay to last

year's edited volume, *On Race, Class, and Educational Reform*, Michael J. Dumas (2023: 63) proposes that because of CRT's origins 'as a leftist, intellectual activist project', any strand of its theory with 'an inadequate critique of capitalism is not worthy of the name'. Dumas generously acknowledges the challenge posed by class analysis, notably that it demands first that CRT reckon with its definition of *critical* and 'the possibility of whether one can advocate radical action against white supremacy while keeping the foundations of capitalism intact' and second, that CRT develops a precise analysis of intra-racial class differences and its implications relative to both class and race interests and struggles (64). What makes Dumas' response possible is a refusal to engage with 'theoretical wrangling' of the debates insofar as 'there may indeed be—if not clear contradictions—what we might call necessary tensions between the two camps' (64). Although their intervention appears in a different conversation, Anthony L. Brown and Noah De Lissovoy show the division into 'two camps' is an antagonism produced *within* the disciplinary and institutional separations of theoretical trajectories. One camp foregrounds analysis of race and racist oppression and the other rethinks class projects in light of racist neoliberalism. Both camps generate important insights, but their division created 'an unintended schism to emerge between race and class theories, in which the concurrent effects of race and class have been either taken for granted or under-theorized in recent years' (2011: 596).

In my reading, Dumas explains the endless spiral of the debates: they're asking the wrong questions! If this is the case, then Dumas is more of a marxist than the (neo)marxists. First, Dumas' methodology is the same as Marx used to develop his unfinished critique of capitalism. Second, Dumas' refusal to tussle over what theory is superior aligns with Marx's organizing and theorizing, in which he embraced united fronts with various and even antagonistic political tendencies. Third, Dumas, like Marx, views theories as dynamic and in motion, not even suggesting a theory can have the 'final word' forever and for all time. My research works from a void Dumas helps me spot in the race-class debates: any engagement with the actual and ongoing world-historic transformations fighting to overthrow racist oppression and imperialist exploitation. The roots of this absence boil down to the real dogmatism holding activist scholarship back: anticommunism. I hold that this dogma keeps potentially radical work circling within a spiral of, in Gabriel Rockhill's (2021: 133) terms, 'critical theories that, whether their object of critique is capitalism or racism, amount to '*theory* that is overwhelmingly *critical* of the praxis of radical social movements. I reclaim the world-historic legacies on which we build, for all their tragedies and defeats, for they do not arise out of thin air, however, but are linked to certain structural conditions and systemic relations specific to time and place and produced with certain intentions. The very real racial divisions and manifestations of white and national chauvinism that fragment and interrupt mass movements and organizations result from myriad factors, but the global revolutionary era led in large part by communists and the colonized world offers both the most fruitful explanations of those conditions and connections and examples of actually overthrowing them.

Simply put, we can't overcome the class-race divide without simultaneously, or beforehand, breaching the theory-reality divide. As Fred Hampton (2014: 139) flawlessly phrased it while speaking on the Black Panther Party's free breakfast programs, 'we sayin' something like this—we saying that theory's cool, but theory with no practice ain't shit'. Speaking academically relative to the race-class literature, the problem I'm identifying is similar but even more elementary in that it isn't even a matter of practice; it's a need to take material reality and history into account. Without the latter, even theory ain't shit. Rather than what theory or theorist is superior, my project is guided by the *objectives to be accomplished* and *the*

objectives we have accomplished (Ford 2023b). The class-race divide can't be bridged in the realm of thought *because* it is the product of academic thought. To be sure, all of us engaged in liberatory work can undertheorize or inaccurately relay the sources on which we base our critiques, build our theories, organize with others, and collectively struggle for global emancipation. As theories are necessarily abstractions, there is intellectual and political value in clarifying worldviews.

Yet the fundamental problem is the idea that we can test the effectivity of any political theory on paper or in the brain. The notion that theoretical battles are won in the realm of theory is an anathema to marxism, which is, above all else, a theoretical weapon used to understand and transform the world that varies depending on time, space, and society. This is crystallized throughout the communist tradition. Take, for example, Kim Il Sung's (1982: 371) articulation of the *Juche* idea, which in essence foregrounds the dynamism of Marxism-Leninism against 'dogmatism, flunkeyism, and formalism', each of which stifle 'our people's creativity'. Carlos Martinez (2023: 24) likewise argues against dividing the Chinese Revolution by any Great Walls, showing that 'the CPC has sought to creatively apply and develop Marxism according to the prevailing concrete circumstances'. Indeed, the marxism that aids liberation struggles never manifests the same as any other.

The fact that this foundational tenet of marxism is rarely addressed or even asked in educational research raised the question with which I titled this paper: 'What's so marxist about marxist educational theory?' This is a kind of rebuttal to Antonia Darder and Rodolfo Torres' (2011) article critiquing CRT from a marxist perspective they titled, 'What's so critical about critical race theory?' Revolutionary theories are only proven *in action,* and we can only evaluate them based on their material, political, affective, psychological, and other effects *relative* to a concrete conjuncture. The question posed in the title is sincere nonetheless, and I start pursuing it by highlighting some contemporary CRT scholarship, showing that it's fertile ground for advancing pedagogical and political praxis against capitalist exploitation, white supremacy, and other forms of oppression.

I explore some of the best attempts at synthesizing 'class' and 'race' scholarship in education to clarify some misreadings that continue circulating before showing how foundational scholarship and contemporary iterations of marxism in education are premised on a dogmatic anticommunism. This grounds my argument that marxist educational scholarship and attempts to bridge the divide are permeated by anticommunism. Identifying the limitations of de Lissovoy and Brown's (2013) otherwise excellent venture into the *history* of organizing against racism and capitalism, I engage the work of Black communists in the U.S. and worldwide. The hinge here is Leninism, for it was the Bolshevik Revolution and Lenin's practice of communism that provided the theoretical and practical link uniting the global struggle of the oppressed, a link that forged the Black and indigenous-led communist movements mostly ignored in academia. Following Gillborn's lead, I lean into the *empirical, autobiographical, and political primacy of white supremacy and capitalism* in the U.S. to make the case that struggles against white supremacy, capitalism, and imperialism depend on an active battle against anticommunism. The reason this matters for educational scholarship is that, as Roderick Ferguson (2012: 9) has it, the university is an apparatus that doesn't socialize subjects into the current order but '*socializes state and capital* into emergent articulations of difference'. Perhaps the reason scholars do so much work distancing their projects from material manifestations of socialism and national liberation, and severing Black revolutionaries from communism or communist parties, is because such differences are unacceptable insofar as they are truly oppositional to the capitalist state.

This leads to my main argument: it is not only the histories of capitalism and racism that keep the academic monopolies churning out book after book to no practical effect; it is also the histories of *anti-Black racism* and *anticommunism*. My object of inquiry isn't the race-class 'theoretical wrangling' but the absence of the actual struggles *and victories* the oppressed have won, fought, and are waging against the capitalist and white supremacist ruling classes. The world-historic and ongoing transformations inaugurated particularly since the beginning of the 20th century are generally erased, mentioned in passing, dismissed, or even worse, denounced in educational and academic scholarship broadly. With the help of Black radicals who were and are members of communist parties, I propose any marxist educational theory worthy of the name must remain open and dynamic and overcome the anticommunism and anti-Black racism inhibiting it and, more importantly, social struggles. To illustrate this, I turn to Black communist Claudia Jones, detailing why communism is off limits to radical thought in the imperialist academy. First, however, I highlight some recent CRT scholarship that opens new *practical* avenues for thinking and struggling against capitalist racism.

The Actuality of Communist and Black Liberation: A Case Study

Adrienne D. Dixson, Ashley N. Woodson, and Celia Rousseau Anderson choreograph their research around the centrality of solidarity and multinational unity to social transformations, even more so than many marxist educational theorists. Dixson (2018: 129) narrates one classroom's miseducation in the anti-slavery movement where students learned the sacrifices made by John Brown—who was positioned as 'biracial'—were of a lone individual acting on personal convictions 'rather than learning that Black and White people worked in coalition and that John Brown was part of a network of enslaved Africans and White Christian men' operating 'within a multiracial history' that, while not the dominant trend overall, nonetheless existed.

Woodson (2017: 320) details how master narratives about the Civil Rights Movement reinforce white supremacy in four ways: they 'essentialize Black people and Black struggle', present 'racism as an accident', portray the struggle as composed of individual 'martyrs and messiahs', and 'suggest the Movement eliminated racism'. Insofar as both iterations of the Black Liberation struggle were not merely about 'race' but also about the material conditions of the reproduction of life, it's clear that struggles against white supremacy and capitalist oppression are not irreconcilably opposed. Such narratives also omit the context of the Civil Rights movement and that it was the first revival of the Black struggle since the McCarthyism of the 1950s. Finally, Dixson and Anderson's (2018: 129) examination of the first 20 years of educational CRT leads to the conclusion that 'perhaps our most important recommendation is for us to collectively seek to ensure that CRT becomes more than an intellectual movement'. Building off this work demands a necessary second step toward the generation of educational scholarship capable of contributing to liberation struggles against racist U.S. imperialism. Challenging (and correcting) the dominant narratives of racism in the U.S. occurs through reclaiming subversive histories, even if these are sometimes minor. Yet thus far neither CRT, marxist, neomarxist, or 'raceclass' (Leonardo 2012) scholars have taken this on and, when they have, never ventured outside the dogma of anticommunism.

As Burden-Stelly (2018: 93-94) documents, 'the entanglements of anticommunism, anti-labor, and the politics of bourgeois privileges and societal recognitions seduced Black Cold War liberals who, through their support of the state apparatus, reproduced anti-radicalism'. Along with repression came the production of anticommunist and anti-radical thought. The CIA's

Congress for Cultural Freedom, for one example, brought together a range of left-wing intellectuals to secure the dogma of anticommunism in the university; 'critical theories' that are critical of capitalism and racism but even more critical of struggles against both. The actuality of revolution is rendered unintelligible because the *one* thing we are sure of is that those who came before us were fools to think history could be altered through revolution. Black Cold War liberalism replaced revolutionary praxis with culturalism, as its proponents 'willfully (if not pragmatically) marginalized Black radical thought to the detriment of labor, internationalism, and antisystemic articulations of freedom' (Burden-Stelly, 2017: 237). White supremacy and capitalist imperialism enclosed intellectual production within anticommunist confines.

In the U.S., anticommunism is inseparable from—and, in fact, constitutive of—white supremacy, anti-Black racism, and national chauvinism. Of the many manifestations of anticommunism as a pillar of white supremacy is its erasure of the contributions Black, indigenous, and colonized peoples made to the theoretical and material fight for global emancipation. By severing Black radicals from communism and communist parties, calling marxism or communism a 'European' or 'white man's' theory, or fixating only on the necessary internal struggles (without highlighting their battleground and avenue was the communist party), educational scholars across the divide uphold anticommunism. Even when Pauline Lipman (2015: 341) defends Marxism by highlighting its later development by 'revolutionaries in Europe, Russia, China, Vietnam, Cuba, Southern Africa, and now Latin America', nowhere does she name any revolutionaries or movements. It is as if Thomas Sankara, Kim Il Sung, Leila Khaled, Ho Chi Minh, Abdul Rahman Mohamed Babu, Kwame Nkrumah, Nur Muhammad Taraki, and countless others didn't exist or aren't worth a mention. Moreover, she doesn't mention the fundamental contributions of Black communists in the U.S. as founders and leaders of past and present communist parties who sacrificed everything, including their lives, for global emancipation.

In *Communist Councilman from Harlem*, a collection of biographical and historical notes by a while incarcerated, Benjamin J. Davis (1969: 189) says the worst danger prison posed to his health was depriving him of 'participation in the struggle for peace—the supreme issue of this mid-century—and for the liberation of the Negro and the colonial peoples'. Arrested under the Smith Act in 1948 Davis, a Black Communist Party leader and the first communist New York City Councilman, was convicted along with 10 of his comrades in 1949 and held captive in an apartheid federal prison in Terre Haute, about an hour's drive from where I'm writing now.

Davis' inauguration into the communist movement started four years after earning his law degree when he took the case of Angelo Herndon, a 19-year-old Black communist charged with trying to 'incite a riot' for organizing demonstrations demanding basic needs during the Great Depression. Davis studied Herndon's newspapers and books and, to see what the classics of 'Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin', he attended a few meetings of Herndon's Party branch. One meeting of 10 members, he notes, included 'three white and seven Negro, men and women—meeting at the home of a Negro worker', before casually writing a parenthetic observation that he 'never attended a single meeting that was not interracial' (59). When their last witness, Herndon, took the stand, he proclaimed that, regardless of what happened to him, 'thousands more will arise to take his place', words that entered Davis' being with 'an inner glow' that compelled him to apply to the Party immediately after (75). Davis' candidacy as a Communist Party member running for the New York City Council was publicized in 1943, a decision Davis the 'individual' didn't make but the collective Party did. The Harlem branch of the Party already announced Carl Brodsky, a Jewish radical with deep roots in Harlem, as their candidate,

although Brodsky withdrew for Davis, acting out 'the close bonds of cooperation that could exist between the Jewish and Negro people' (106), with Davis' victory secured by the Jewish vote.

Less than a decade later, the City Councilman and his comrades were arrested for violating the anticommunist Smith Act. The primary factor was the end of World War II and the U.S.-Soviet alliance. At this point, Davis (1969: 161) recalls, 'the pro-fascist, Negro-hating forces which had been held in check during the war, began to break loose'. The FBI sat back while both political parties remained 'silent' about the increasing violence. 'The Communists and other progressives, having been among the foremost fighters against Hitler, were now to be the new victims of the monopolists' wrath', Davis (163) writes. When a multiracial movement, initiated by Communists, inaugurated a widespread fight-back struggle, the state went from passive acceptance to active participation. Davis and his comrades were convicted and sent to prison in 1949 in the first of many crackdowns on Black and communist organizing in this particular inflection of the anti-Black and anti-red state policy. Within years, hundreds of the Party's leaders were driven underground, blacklisted, repressed, and even deported.

The Happy Marriage of Anti-Black Racism and Anticommunism

While much is made of the apparently unbridgeable divide between class and race, there is little attention paid to the well-documented marriage of anti-Black racism and anticommunism. To this day, white supremacy and anti-communism in the U.S. are linked through the emancipation of the formerly enslaved and the formerly colonized and exploited. Reconstruction—even after its counterrevolutionary overthrow—was 'one of the largest uncompensated expropriations' until, that is, the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Gerald Horne (1998: 282-283) accordingly posits that 'African Americans are living reminders of lost fortunes', and 'the reaction to socialism—which has also involved expropriations of property—is difficult to separate from race and racism'. None of this is to discount the devastating impacts of white supremacy and national chauvinism, along with sexism and other forms of oppression, on the struggles for global emancipation in the U.S. These, coupled with the repressive (and productive) force of the state, must be reckoned with, yet we must do so not in theoretical vacuums but in the material history of the revolutionary transformations in which we are located.

The lack of—or partial and misleading—theorization of key revolutionary organizers, organizations, and theorists is particularly notable in the work of left scholars, who generally include a priori and baseless dismissals of the global revolutionary struggles. The dogma of anticommunism today is most noticeable in the alleged revival of marxist educational scholarship, beginning with Paula Allman, who coined the phrase 'revolutionary critical pedagogy' to distinguish its marxist roots from those of critical pedagogy. In setting out her 'vision' in *Revolutionary Social Transformation*, Allman (1999: 9) begins by discounting the heroic socialist and national liberation struggles of the 20th century because they didn't adhere to her 'vision' based is on the meaning of socialism/communism which can be culled from the writings of Karl Marx', and therefore has little to do with 'actually existing socialism'. This 'authentic socialism' lets Allman reproduce the racist and imperialist dismissal of socialist projects, projecting an idealistic 'authentic socialism' that is *superior* to the actual work of revolution (see Ford 2023a).

First, Allman (2007: 55, emphasis added) baselessly characterizes the Bolshevik Revolution as 'a socialist/communist state *purportedly* based on Marxism'. We aren't sure what to make of such a qualification, particularly when she continues the argument by claiming that

the state 'under Stalin's leadership developed into a totalitarian monstrosity and that was followed not many years later by Hitler's fascist totalitarian equivalent' (55). Allman provides zero evidence to substantiate such claims because she is repeating what Domenico Losurdo (2023: 175) identifies as 'an obsession in dominant ideology to equate Stalin and Hitler in the most complete way possible, to the point of presenting them as twin monsters'. Allman might be even worse, as only Stalin's state was 'a totalitarian' monster! Moreover, Allman engages in a decidedly anti-marxist 'great man' theory of history, in which single individuals—abstracted from their social context and political projects—are responsible for entire epochs and projects. The same is true of Cole (2017: 232) who argues that 'Stalinism' was 'totalitarian' because it entailed constructing socialism 'in one country' (as if there were other choices!) and insinuating that *real marxists* argued it must be international (i.e., it depended on European socialist revolutions that never materialized).

Allman develops her anticommunist formulations by denouncing socialist states still existing at the end of the 20th century, those that managed to survive to fall of the Soviet Union. 'They seem to have forgotten', Allman (1999: 78) declares without naming a single state, 'the socialist values and their experiences of security in terms of employment, housing, education and healthcare', before saying they no longer pose a challenge to capital because they don't pursue 'social justice and the enrichment of human needs' without 'undemocratic forms of governance and methods to suppress and eliminate resistance'. This is worth noting because the socialist states in existence were non-white countries (e.g., Vietnam, Cuba, China, and Laos), and because survival is quite remarkable, particularly in Cuba and Korea, both of which lost their main trading partners overnight and then immediately faced a tightening of blockades and embargos by U.S. imperialism. They survived because of shared sacrifices for precisely what Allman thinks they forgot and no longer possessed, and because of the revolutionary spirit and enthusiasm of the masses and their leadership.

The same anticommunism permeates educational scholarship that synthesizes race and class as part of an overarching totality, although here it is misunderstandings or misreadings of Marx (on top of a neglect of other marxists, most notably Lenin). Case in point are the constant references to W.E.B. Du Bois' alleged rejection of marxism and communism. When De Lissovoy and Brown (2013: 544) examine the history of Black-white solidarity alliances, they provide two historical examples of their failure: the anti-slavery and abolitionist movement and the fightback against the overthrow of Reconstruction in the early 20th century. While Black activists and thinkers were attracted to 'socialist ideas and establish[ed] class alliances', they claim, this was 'short-lived' and resulted in the specific formation of Black revolutionary groups.

Du Bois' oft-cited and important essay written after resigning from the Socialist Party, 'Socialism and the Negro Problem', backs their claim. Du Bois critiqued the Party for confirming what he titled his essay published the year he joined the Party, 'Socialism is too Narrow'. Du Bois was correct, as are De Lissovoy and Brown, that this evidences the national chauvinism and racism of the Socialist Party. They are also correct it shows the reasons for the growth and appeal of Black nationalist organizations in the early 20th century. By ending the narrative with a 1913 article on the *Socialist* Party and using it to summarize the possibility of Black-white solidarity in the U.S., however, they repeat a common fault in educational scholarship. The essay is used to argue Du Bois rejected marxism and the communist project because of its intractable racism or Eurocentrism.

One example is Kamau Rachid (2011: 593) who, after correctly relaying Du Bois' accurate portrayal of the U.S. Socialist Party as one that subordinated anti-racism to anti-

capitalism, goes on to generalize this particular critique of a specific party in a particular conjuncture, space, and time to the entirety of marxism and the communist party. 'Du Bois', Rachid relays, 'states that 'the general attitude of thinking members of the [communist] party has been this'. In 1913 there was *no* communist party. Herein lies the rub: it is exactly the reconfiguration of the world communist movement after the Bolshevik Revolution that communism emerged as a distinct trend from the chauvinistic, economistic, and racist trend of the socialism of the Second International. What educational theory misses is the practical and theoretical lynchpin between the Black Liberation and communist movements: Leninism. Addressing this missing link in educational theory is crucial for our understanding of and organizing for the freedom of all against exploitation and oppression.

De Lissovoy and Brown (2013) come close to approaching the global revolutionary era. When they mention the growth of Black nationalist organizations that picked up steam as a result of the Socialist Party's racism, one of which they mention by name: the African Black Brotherhood (ABB). The ABB—a small and relatively underground and secret grouping—from its inception in 1919, however, shared members with and, in a few years dissolved into, the Communist Party USA. It is just before this juncture, which would prove to be one of the most decisive and inspiring turning points in the world-historic process for global emancipation—and that ushered in the most revolutionary advances in the theorizations of and struggles against the dialectical unity of race and class they advance, in addition to the dialectical unity of white supremacy, capitalist exploitation, national oppression, and imperialist plunder—that they close their story.

Lenin: Uniting the socialist and national liberation struggles in praxis

The Bolshevik Revolution inaugurated the most profound and dramatic wave of emancipatory struggles in what is called the 'Cold War' but is better termed the global class war, a war between the imperialist bloc led by the United States, on the one hand, and the working and oppressed peoples of the world led by the Soviet Union and other socialist states, on the other hand (Becker 2018; Ford 2017). It wasn't a war between imperialism and socialism because members of the oppressed camp were bourgeois nationalists, and some in the former were bourgeois lackeys in oppressed nations. A new global phenomenon of anti-imperialist struggles against oppression emerged and strengthened each manifestation, including the Black Liberation struggle in the U.S. The revolution demonstrated workers and oppressed peoples could make history and throw off the shackles of oppression and exploitation, spreading hope and inspiration across the world. Later, the Soviet Union was able to not only defeat the Nazis and radically improve the standards of its people while drastically moving toward an egalitarian society, but also provide economic, political, educational, and military support as the colonized overthrew their colonizers. While the Soviet Union lasted for 70 years, an incredibly short period (and less than the current U.S. life expectancy), it helped revolutionaries overthrow their oppressors and created indigenous, people-centered social orders across almost half the globe. In each instance, parties based on or influenced by Leninist praxis provided the vehicle for overthrowing their oppressors and taking power into their own hands.

Immediately after seizing power, the Bolsheviks pursued three simultaneous tasks, with each seeming impossible to achieve. First, they had to immediately defend their revolution from the invasions of the 14 most powerful imperialist countries—including the U.S.—and against counterrevolutionary elements in the territories. Second, during this protracted war and with a

highly underdeveloped economy, they had to begin constructing the material foundations for socialism. Third, they had to reorganize the world communist movement by breaking with the racist and chauvinist Second International and creating the Third International or Communist International (Comintern). The task most pertinent to the most powerful internationalist and multiracial unity was the reorganization of the Communist movement, a monumental feat. The Third International—or Comintern—was always concerned with the decolonization of Africa.

The Comintern's first meeting, in 1919, was limited by the world blockade of the revolution that prevented invitations from arriving to their recipients, the entrance of those who did receive invitations, not to mention this was at the height of the flu pandemic, the most severe one in history. At that meeting, they resolved to fully support all anti-colonial revolutions whatever their ideological bent. Both Lenin and Stalin wrote about the national question and the right of oppressed nations to self-determination. Stalin's (1953: 331) book, *Marxism and the National Question* first defined the right to self-determination as the ability of an oppressed nation 'to determine its destiny', to prevent any country from attempts to 'forcibly to interfere in the life of the nation, to destroy its schools and other institutions, to violate its habits and customs, to repress its language, or curtail its rights'. This was personal for Stalin, who grew up in the oppressed Georgian nation, where he attended schools taught in the foreign tongue of Russian rather than the indigenous languages of Armenian, Turkish, or Georgian dialectic. Students were forbidden from speaking their languages, and Stalin was still in grade school when he participated in demonstrations against national oppression. Overcoming national oppression and Russian chauvinism, Stalin declared, meant fighting for the equality '*of nations in all forms (language, schools, etc.*)' (376). The goal was proletarian international unity, but Stalin and Lenin's twist that forging unity required a basis of equality beforehand.

Lenin drafted a resolution on the national question for the Second Comintern Congress in 1920, soliciting reports from those with knowledge about Ireland, the Balkans, Turkestan, China, Korea, as well as Negroes in America. Derived from Lenin's study of the need for Black Liberation in the U.S. published in 1915 and based on 1910 U.S. census data (Haywood 1978: 224), Lenin's theory of imperialism provided the link between socialist and national liberation struggles. With the blooming of monopoly capital, Lenin theorized that the oppressed and working classes in the imperialist, semi-imperialist, and colonized countries shared a common enemy. Communists had to reveal this link to fight imperialism and national chauvinism, as 'the Great Russians in Russia are an oppressor nation, and opportunism in the national question will of course find expression among oppressed nations otherwise than among oppressor nations' (Lenin 2019: 305). The Bolsheviks called Russia a 'prison house of nations'. imprisoning almost 200 distinct nationalities and subjecting them to Russian colonialism, prohibiting their practice of indigenous cultures and religions, depriving them of education and the right to vote, and viewing them as property.

The question was how to *unite* these oppressed nations with the Russian nation without reproducing national oppression. The answer was that communists would fight for the self-determination of *all* oppressed nations up to—and including—the right to succeed. 'We nationals of a big nation, Lenin (1977: 607) writes, 'have nearly always been guilty, in historic practice, of an infinite number of cases of violence; furthermore, we commit violence and insult an infinite number of times without noticing it', continuing:

> That is why internationalism on the part of oppressors or 'great' nations, as they are called (though they are great only in their violence, only great as bullies), must consist

> not only in the observance of the formal equality of nations but even in an inequality of the oppressor nation, the great nation, that must make up for the inequality which obtains in actual practice.

In late 1917, the Bolsheviks started the People's Commissariat of Nationalities to protect and advance the unity that won their struggle for power against forces looking to divide the Soviet peoples based on nationalities. They alphabetized national languages, dozens for the first time, promoted cultural expressions, and implemented affirmative action policies, all of which significantly overcame the former Russian Empire. That principle was extended, through collaboration with the revolutionary Black U.S. movement starting in the 1920s and solidified in 1928 at the Comintern's Sixth Congress.

The master narrative unsurprisingly dismisses the historic significance of this moment by seeing the Black Belt thesis as an importation from Moscow, erasing the long-standing struggle for Black nationhood in the U.S. and constructing Black people as pawns. There was no effort to collapse the Black struggle into the socialist struggle or vice versa. The Black struggle is much longer than the socialist movement and was, from the get, 'characterized by the fight for equality and the right of Black folk to their own separate existence as a dignified people' (Chapman 2021: 92). That struggle's various visions and manifestations were united by the yearning for the realization of nationhood birthed through the long and heroic history of the resistance of the enslaved. Cyril Briggs, who first articulated the Black Belt Thesis, was a former leader of the ABB who joined the CPUSA and 'prided himself on the fact that he never joined the Socialist Party' for reasons discussed above (88). Briggs, of course, was building on a centuries-long legacy organic to the U.S. Black struggle, oe much older than the socialist movement.

All the same, it was the Bolshevik Revolution and its leaders' struggles for and writing on self-determination that provided the spark for a revolutionary project uniting Black Liberation and socialism. Instead of *leaving* the communist movement, Black revolutionaries joined it and collectively struggled over the correct position to take. For example, another former ABB leader, Claude McKay was the first to articulate the defects in the Party's idea that the root of Black oppression was the psychological feelings and attitudes of white people, an economistic line that sidelined the centrality of racism to capitalism. With the foundational theories from Black resistance in the U.S. and Bolshevik leaders, at Stalin's insistence the 6th congress of the Comintern adopted the 'Black Belt Resolution', acknowledging the existence of a Black nation and requiring *all communists* to fight for its complete freedom and self-determination. Hakim Adi (2023: 83) confirms that although 'the Comintern, and its highest body the Congress, played a decisive role in the adoption of these theses as policy, [B]lack communists also played a leading part in drafting and advocating their adoption'. The only way to defeat racist oppression and national or white chauvinism in society and the Party was through prioritizing the Black struggle and the struggle of Black women workers in particular. Even in the top leadership of the international communist movement Black people were central figures and theoreticians, often leading the most significant advances in parity politics and politics.

Anticommunism: Affirming Africans Lost the Global Class War

Recognizing that African peoples weren't pawns of the Soviet Union but agents that *facilitated* cooperation with the major socialist powers, Gerald Horne (1996: 613) concludes it was ultimately Africa and Black people in the U.S. who lost the Cold War: 'Sierra Leone, Rwanda,

Burundi, and Liberia are just the most extreme examples of a catastrophe that has befallen a continent that could once court East and West to its advantage'. This is true in the realm of ideas, too, as U.S. anticommunism left 'a toxic intellectual landscape that has had a devastating impact on African Americans in particular' insofar as 'this community over the years had come to rely heavily on intellectuals, notably proletarian intellectuals, whose forte was radicalism' (2002: 38). Such Black proletarian intellectuals, he clarifies, existed during the era of chattel slavery, something Marx also clarified but without recognizing its future significance. How could Black proletarian intellectuals be produced by and operate within the slave mode of production? How could enslaved Africans be part of the working class?

Marx's concept of class is a primary source of confusion and unnecessary polemics between academic scholars. Even the friendliest of critics like Zeus Leonardo (2012: 432) hold that marxism adheres to a model with 'two main classes… the propertied class, or the bourgeoisie', that 'owns not only the means of production but also its social cognates' and 'the propertyless class, or the workers' who 'own primarily their labor, which they exchange for wages within an unequal relation of power'. When Marx (1967: 537) examines the simple reproduction of capital, he finds that 'the working-class, even when not directly engaged in the labour-process, is just as much an appendage of capital as the ordinary instruments of labor'. To be fair, Leonardo (2012: 432) acknowledges *some* more nuance in Marx, but this doesn't prevent the assertion that unwaged or unemployed workers are *really* classes because they don't 'comprise part of the motor of history, the fundamental tension and driving force of which is located between the bourgeoisie and workers. The same is true in his insistence on Marx's Eurocentrism, which he claims—without citing Marx—that because of marxism's 'determinisms, teleologies, and priorities, it gives race analysis short shrift' (Leonardo 2009: 76). Admitting that Marx (and Engels) 'affirmed the rights of Ireland and other European nations to self-determination', he quotes Ward Churchill to posit Marx viewed non-European people as 'uncivilized'. Marx and Engels (1967: 224, emphasis added) rather argued capitalists 'compels all nations… to introduce what *it* calls civilization into their midst'.[1]

In their 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, a rushed manifesto for European revolutions Marx and Engels (1967: 220) account for multiple classes—including slaves and workers—before stating that capitalism doesn't *create* two classes but rather 'has simplified the class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat'. In this class struggle, the latter is simultaneously both a 'camp' and a 'class', as *processes* rather than achieved or fixed states. The proletarian class was and is international, and it included colonized peoples and enslaved Africans, whom Marx categorized as *workers*. He did distinguish between 'slaves' or 'black slaves', 'fugitive slaves' or 'fugitives', and 'black men' or 'free blacks' to name 'their racial and legal standing in society and to indicate their political role at different moments of the Civil War' (Battistini 2021: 162). By listening and attending to the rebellions and calls of Black workers fleeing plantations, Marx connected the African slave trade, colonialism, and capitalism as not only interlocking but also global systems. Colonization, the slave-trade, and settler colonialism were central features of *British* capitalism—the most developed form with the best available documentation, which is it served as a case study for him—meaning his theory of value was inherently global and wasn't merely 'economic' or about labor vs. capital. Marx and Engels formulated the privileged position of the proletarian as the revolutionary subject, but this didn't refer to any *national* or *racial* proletarian but to all of those who are exploited and oppressed across the globe.

Marx (1979: 93) even argued that the anti-colonial rebellions would come *before* and would *ignite* the socialist revolutions in the colonizing countries. For Marx, slavery, colonialism, theft, and dispossession, were and *are* central features of capital accumulation in Britain (Ford 2023b). Slavery and capitalism co-existed as different modes of production that could occupy the same space and time. This is why Marx (1973: 104) called the U.S. the 'most developed form of existence of bourgeois society' even though capitalism and slavery were both present. Both existed as *modes of production*, as just a few pages earlier Marx clarifies that a country's production has to be 'structured to allow of slave labour, or (as in the southern part of America etc.) a mode of production corresponding to the slave must be created' (98). Marx certainly did not—and didn't claim to—fully flesh out a theory about racism and the socialist struggle, yet those who followed in the revolutionary communist tradition did, based *largely* on Marx's method and organizing, which included leading British workers to strike against British intervention on behalf of the south in the U.S. civil war, his advocacy for anti-colonial rebellions, and his belief that, *because of the white supremacist* attitudes of workers in oppressing nations, socialists in those nations must not merely 'affirm' but *fight* for the right of all colonized nations to self-determination. The proletarian class was and is international, and for Marx, it included colonized peoples and enslaved Africans—whom Marx categorized as *workers*—as well as waged and unwaged, employed, and unemployed workers in any sector of production, and the 'dangerous classes' who resisted employment.

The silencing of Black Communist Women Despite their Immense Sacrifices

Decades before 'intersectionality' became a buzzword, Claudia Jones (and other Black communist women in the communist movement) theorized the unique oppression of Black women workers. Born in Trinidad in 1915, Jones is one of the most significant revolutionary theorists and organizers of the 20th century. Joining the Communist Party in 1936 through the struggle to free the Scottsboro Boys, she rapidly developed as an organizer and intellectual and within two years was the associate editor of the CPUSA's *Weekly Review* and after another two years was the lead editor. Jones theorized the super-oppression of Black women workers (waged and unwaged) through their exploited labor, subjugated status as women, and oppressed Black identity. This was documented with statistical evidence about the role of women workers in various industries and the domestic sphere and framed as a *political* matter confronting the Party and all progressives. In a *Political Affairs* article, Jones argued positioning 'the question as a 'personal' and not a political matter', Jones (1949: 61) asserted, 'is to be guilty of the worst kind of Social Democratic, bourgeois-liberal thinking'. Jones highlighted the work done by the Party and white men and women in organizing Black women workers. That this struggle played out in the CPUSA's theoretical journal that was publicly available counters the master narrative of the communist movement globally and in the U.S.

Jones publicly criticized the Party for general and specific errors. For Jones, super-exploitation correlated with a heightened role in the movement. 'The Negro woman, who combines in her status the worker, the Negro, and the woman', Jones (1949: 63) wrote, 'is the vital link to this heightened political consciousness'. The Party as a whole had to take a leading role in organizing Black women workers, but the burden for fighting 'special forms of white chauvinism rests not with the "subjectivity" of Negro women… but squarely on the shoulders of white men and white women', as well as Black men who 'have a special responsibility particularly in relation to rooting out attitudes of male superiority as regards women in general'

(62). In her historic 1950 International Women's Day speech, she urged 'progressive and communist men must become vanguard fighters against male supremacist ideas and for equal rights for women' because the oft-heard 'glib talk about women "as allies" wasn't matched by any 'commensurate effort to combat male supremacy notions which hamper woman's ability to struggle for peace and security' (1950: 43). Special oppression did not contradict united struggle.

In a later *Political Affairs* article, Jones (1951: 154) makes an impassioned plea for the Party to build a '*distinct* women's peace movement' in the United States against the imperialist war on Korea. Jones articulated the position of the National Women's Commission's line that a '*new phenomenon*—of worldwide identification and sisterhood of women' was emerging, a movement spreading 60 countries under the leadership of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China and in which women in the U.S. had to play a role. As she wrote, 'American women bear a heavy responsibility to the millions of our anti-fascist sisters in the world camp of peace, precisely because the threat to world peace stems from the imperialists of our land' (157). Traces of a U.S. expression of that new phenomenon included a physical women's peace office—but that did not necessarily follow that the Party should dedicate its resources to intervening in and ultimately creating a revolutionary pole within that movement.

It must be remembered that the Asian Women's Conference organized by the Women's International Democratic Federation, which Jones references, was held in Beijing in December 1949, just a few months after the communists liberated China from the century of humiliation. At the same time, parsing through the various arguments against the position, Jones expresses how organizing women *qua* women is a discrete manifestation of a broad-based anti-imperialist coalition uniting the Black liberation struggle, the women's struggle, and the socialist struggle. It was becoming clear to Black people that 'the bloody massacre of the people of Korea [is] an extension of the foul white supremacy oppression and contempt for the Negro people to the colored people of all of Asia' (160). Black fathers and sons were dying in the imperialist war of aggression and were murdered when they returned home by police. Jones seamlessly links the struggle against imperialism—the global manifestation of capitalism—with the Black liberation struggle and the women's emancipation movement, identifying the leading role played by communist states and global organizations in all struggles.

Never free of government harassment and surveillance, after the state refused to grant Jones citizenship in 1947, J. Edgar Hoover directed the FBI to officially launch a campaign for her deportation. Jones remained committed to struggling *within* the Party structure and together *with* her comrades. Unity and solidarity can only be forged through struggle, not in abstract theories. Moreover, it is built through *shared* sacrifice of a kind that is not quantifiable or exchange-value but determined *collectively*. There was intentional political education and practice and a thoughtful and flexible division of labor. There was action and organizing. There were errors and amends. There was a *shared goal* as most of the world—including white people in the U.S.—have more in common with each other than we do with the tiny clique of imperialists and bankers that determine our daily lives. It wasn't individual identities that initiated organizing to build unity but a shared political commitment that the special interests and experiences of different racial and gender groups that strengthened their politics and sharpened their tactics and strategies. They weren't allies but *comrades*; people committed to and disciplined to each other and the revolutionary struggle and who sacrificed so much to advance the movement until—and after—her deportation.

One prominent instance is when Jones, having been convicted of several charges, among them conspiring to overthrow the U.S. government, with 13 other communist leaders in January

1953, delivered a statement in front of Judge Edward J. Dimrock before receiving her sentencing the next month. Jones wasn't speaking to the judge or the U.S. state, both of which she viewed as impotent, but to the real force in the world: the global peace movement. Jones (1953: 19) begins articulating her hope that her statement might 'even one whit to further dedicate growing millions of Americans to fight for peace and to repel the fascist drive on free speech and thought in our country'. While it was Jones' and the communist movement's overall organizing and beliefs for which they stood trial, in her statement Jones specifically attends to one piece of the prosecution's evidence: Jones' International Women's Day speech published in *Political Affairs* under the title, 'Women in the Struggle for Peace and Security'. It appeared in March 1950, the same year the state obtained an order for Jones' deportation. In her trial, the prosecution presented the article and speech of evidence. Although it was Jones' overall communist organizing and beliefs on trial, in her statement, she specifically attends to her 1950 'International Women's Day Speech published in *Political Affairs* the same year under the title, 'Women in the Struggle for Peace and Security'.

The state trotted out the article but did not read it, or, as Jones clarifies, *could not* read it. They could not do so, Jones (1953: 23) stated, because 'it urges American mothers, Negro women and white, to emulate the peace struggles of their anti-fascist sisters in Latin America, in the new European democracies, in the Soviet Union, in Asia and Africa to end the bestial Korean war… to reject the militarist threat to embroil us in a war with China, so that their children should not suffer the fate of the Korean babies murdered by napalm bombs of B-29s, or the fate of Hiroshima'. How terrifyingly prescient Jones' words resonate with us here today, 70 years on. We not only face—and fight—the ongoing and intensifying imperialist aggression against Korea but also the U.S'. s 'New Cold War against the People's Republic of China. That the threat of war is looming is no mere rhetoric, as the Department of Defense has explicitly articulated its new military doctrine as one guided by 'Great Power Rivalry' (e.g., Ford 2019; Martinez 2023).

Conclusion

At the height of the CPUSA's influence, Black comrades were leading theoreticians and organizers, standing united with white workers and the global proletariat against a common enemy. Jones was largely responding to the right-wing shift in the Party's position on the Black question in the late 1940s. This shift was largely the result of state repression and interference but was partly driven by the resulting production of a tendency within the Party holding the struggle couldn't advance 'until all vestiges of white chauvinism were driven from the [Party's] ranks' (Haywood 1978: 588). Such idealism assumes we first create equality and a utopian group before engaging in struggle, rather than doing the work of struggling together and building together. This 'phony war' on white chauvinism had two devastating effects. First, it allowed 'leading white comrades to abdicate their responsibilities in fighting chauvinism and rallying white workers in defense of Black rights' while producing a culturalist tendency in which white people couldn't critique Black comrades, depriving Black revolutionaries of 'the benefit of criticism and self-criticism' (589). Second, it was approached punitively through immediate expulsion and isolation. In sum, 'white chauvinism came to be considered as a sort of phenomenon; a thing in itself, separate from the fight for Black rights and proletarian revolution' that was moral rather than political (587). Hence Jones' insistence Black women workers' super-oppression was a political matter requiring the organized efforts of the Party and progressive movement.

As the U.S. state destroyed the Party, the communist struggle accelerated throughout Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The global revolutionary tide continued to swell, eventually facilitating the re-emergence of the revolutionary left in the U.S. in the mid-1960s-70s. North Korea gave key support for anti-colonial revolutions in Mozambique, Angola, Zambia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, which it defended against an invasion by the South African apartheid regime (Choi and Jeong 2017). At the request of African revolutionaries, the Soviets actively supported socialist and national liberation struggles across the continent, from Egypt and Algeria to Angola and Somalia. Even after the dissolution of the Comintern, the Soviets funneled military advisors and weapons through the African National Congress, staffed training camps, and brought and hosted dozens of Africans at schools specializing in the guerrilla warfare methodology their struggles required. As the training of larger numbers of cadres became necessary, the Soviets created a base in Crimea (Shubin 2009). From there, Africans overthrew the rule of white supremacist governments backed by U.S. imperialism. The USSR gave essential diplomatic and political and military support for North Korea, China, Cuba, Afghanistan, the People's Republic of Yemen, with Cuba then providing key assistance in Angola and Guinea-Bissau, and Cape Verde. Just as importantly, and again at the request of African resistance leaders themselves, the Soviets provided educational assistance, particularly in 1960 with the opening of what was soon renamed the 'Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University', a school dedicated to facilitating the free education for peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America to study for free in the Soviet Union.

Educational theory hasn't engaged the history of socialist revolutions, countries, and federations, nor have they taken seriously the Black, African, and other oppressed nationalities who developed and creatively applied communist theory to their particular situations and, in many cases *won historical* accomplishments, including in the U.S. By turning to the material history of struggles against capitalist exploitation, racist oppression, and gendered violence, we can not only draw hope and inspiration but learn important lessons as well. For Jones, Lenin, Haywood, and others, marxism is nothing if not flexible and dynamic, radically historical, which is why I find the formulation of 'stretching' marxism redundant.

Perhaps this is why Walter Rodney (2019: 11) argued that with the Russian Revolution, 'white power has been slowly reduced'. 'The Russians are white and have power', he notes, 'but they are not a colonial power oppressing [B]ack peoples. The white power which is our enemy is that which is exercised over [B]lack peoples'. Opposite the white power of imperialism, communist forces sacrificed and supported the self-determination and reclamation of Black culture and language. Revolutionary educational theory should perhaps build on that project of *global emancipation* based on *ongoing struggle* founded on internationalist solidarity and developed *in practice*. In my reading, contemporary CRT is more open to such an engagement, although I hope comrades in marxist educational theory can overcome their anti-communist dogmas well. The point, after all, is not to one-up- each other in theory but to advance the struggle practically and theoretically.

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[1] Marx and Engels didn't view capitalist civilization uncritically or undialectically. Nor did those who participated in the first pan-African congress in the late 19th century who, as Hakim Adi (2023: 22) writes, retained the Eurocentric notion of the African as subject… and the need to bring 'civilization' and commerce to Africa from the outside.