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'The human ocean of the colored races': interwar Black internationalism, Marxism, and permanent revolution

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ABSTRACT

In the international Communist movement after the Russian Revolution, Black radical opponents of racism, colonialism, and capitalism entered a productive dialogue with European socialist revolutionism. This tradition was itself shaped by decades of theoretical disagreement around the relationship between historical development and socialist revolution. Common to the leading figures of Europe's revolutionary Left (Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky) was an emphasis on the uninterrupted continuity of democratic and socialist revolutions in the epoch of imperialism. 'Permanent revolution' became a phrase associated exclusively with Trotskyists, but many Communists in different traditions professed affiliation with a flexible and revolutionary version of Marxism. As such, though the language of uninterrupted or permanent revolution was often absent from Black Marxist writing in the 1920s and 1930s, writers such as Claude McKay, Grace Campbell, C.L.R. James, and W.E.B. Du Bois articulated Marxist perspectives on Black oppression that similarly transcended rigid and economist versions of Marxism. Their additional emphasis was on the vanguard role of anticolonial radicals in the world revolution. As Black internationalists appropriated Marxism, they deployed a logic that helps to connect revolutionary theory in Europe with the intellectual work of radical Black internationalists.

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In the rapidly expanding scholarship on Black internationalism, Marxist conceptual tools and Communist political networks have become established as central elements in border-crossing Black political movements. The years spanning the closure of inter-imperial hostilities in 1918 and the renewal of global warfare in 1939 have been recognised as among the high-points of this Red-Black confluence. These years witnessed the first meetings between Black radical activists and European Marxist revolutionaries, notably at the Congresses of the Communist International. The emergent collaboration between Black and European radicals led – among many notable developments – to the publication of the *Negro Worker* newspaper (1928–37) by the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, an organ headed by Trinidadian George Padmore. Though he shortly broke from Marxism, Padmore carried his experience as a leading Black Communist organiser into his long and world-making career as a revolutionary pan-Africanist. In this work, Padmore collaborated closely with his childhood acquaintance C.L.R. James, who was a Trotskyist cadre during the 1930s. By the end of the decade, James had authored one of the seminal texts of historical materialism and of Black Studies, *The Black Jacobins* (Weiss, 2014). In 1940, as Europe drew the world into another bloody crucible of inter-imperial competition and antifascist struggle, African American student Esther Cooper Jackson demonstrated her Communist sympathies by producing an empirical

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study of Black women proletarians in the US (Haviland, 2015, 52). Such ground-breaking efforts on the part of Leftist Black intellectuals were matched by significant Communist influence in the rapidly intensifying class struggles led by Black workers in the US, the Caribbean, and Africa (Stevens, 2017).

A rich literature (Adi, 2013; Andrews, 2011; Gilyard, 2017; Horne, 2013; Makalani, 2011; Matera, 2015; McDuffie, 2011) has salvaged this interwar Black radicalism from Cold War-era obfuscation, re-establishing Black Marxist networks as nodes of world-historical transformation in the twentieth century. This essay will develop on that established literature by staging a productive encounter between the literature on radical Black internationalism with another, quite different, body of scholarship, wherein scholars have traced and contested Marxist theorisations of historical development and socialist transformation. Marxist conceptions of bourgeois-democratic revolution, proletarian revolution, and permanent revolution have been subject to rigorous scholarly re-evaluation in recent years (Anievas, 2015; Davidson, 2019; Gerstenberger, 2019; Post, 2019; Riley, 2015), much of which has relied upon a thorough excavation of writing by European Marxists including Marx and Engels, Kautsky, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Parvus, and Gramsci.

This essay contends that, while rarely addressed explicitly as such, when Black Marxists of the interwar period were theorising racism and developing internationalist anticolonial politics, they were rearticulating and extending ideas around the permanence or uninterruptedness of revolutionary processes that had shaped and divided European Marxism earlier in the twentieth century. By exploring Black Marxist writing in these terms, the essay identifies fundamental but neglected points of agreement between European and Black radical traditions. I contend that Black radical writers dramatically stretched the hitherto tentative hypotheses of European Marxists about alternative global geographies of socialist revolution. Above all, Black Marxists theorised the vanguard role of the racialised global majority in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. By doing so, interwar Black Marxism provides a theoretical bridge between Second International-era conceptions of 'revolution in permanence' with the Third Worldist emphasis on the agency of colonised, racialised, and peasant peoples to generate revolutionary transformations.

While theoretical differences between European and Black Marxists could at times be sharp and significant during the 1920s and 1930s, the picture that emerges here is of fundamentally compatible, and organically convergent, political movements. European Marxists helped to establish a conceptual and political framework for Black radical politics in the twentieth century, even as Black radicals in turn challenged European revolutionaries to reassess their understanding of revolutionary agency. Such a picture of radical intellectual history challenges claims that Black radical politics have been incommensurable with a Marxist tradition that is still routinely dismissed as irremediably Eurocentric. The 'assumption [. . .] that white male workers in the advanced industrial sectors constituted the most exploited segment of the working class and thereby its revolutionary vanguard' was certainly not 'fundamental' (McDuffie, 2011, 50–1) if we take the permanentist strain of Marxist theorising seriously.

Instead, Black Marxist assessments of global class and colonial dynamics should be understood as an extension of discussions around the 'permanence' of revolutionary process that ran through the Marxist tradition, but which are most often associated with the Trotsky-Stalin split. Despite some permanentist strains of Black Marxist thought having emerged from within the Stalinised Communist movement, the revolutionary thrust of this logic demanded the transcendence of Stalin's vulgarised Marxism. If permanent revolution is therefore a hallmark of unvulgarized versions of historical materialist analysis, then accounts of its articulation are incomplete without the anticolonial internationalism of such figures as Hubert Harrison and Claude McKay, W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James. The following discussion will help to construct a more global intellectual history of Marxism: one which retains that tradition's revolutionary edge and that helps to extend its anticolonial reach.

The essay will proceed in three parts. First, I will briefly summarise the origins and meaning of permanent revolution in the European Marxist tradition. This synoptic discussion will encompass its roots in the work of Marx and Engels, its diverse articulations in the centre and left of the Second International, and its development, distortion and weaponization amid the degeneration of the

Communist International. Second, I will use the biography and writings of Claude McKay (the first Black Trotskyist) to trace his radical class-based anticolonial politics to a milieu of US-based Caribbean nationalists in the 1910s. Through McKay, these came into direct contact with the paragon of 'permanentist' Marxism, Leon Trotsky. Finally, I will trace the circulation of a permanentist model of Black liberation in later writings and conversations of Black radicals, referring both to the Trotskyist James and to individuals (Du Bois, Haywood) more closely associated with the Stalinised Communist movement.

The radical tradition explored here is geographically expansive, but its prominent figures are men. Black women Communists, the most prominent of whom were Grace Campbell and Louise Thompson, evinced a particular concern with the circumstances and role of women members of the Black proletariat. In this, they presented implicit challenges to masculinist framings in radical organisations (McDuffie, 2011, 48–52). Campbell also participated in Communist factional struggles (she was part of the minority Lovestoneite group, and thereby lost favour). In 1928, amid sharp divisions in the movement, Campbell even authored a critical evaluation of the emergent Communist policy in support of national self-determination for African Americans, which will be considered below (Lindsey, 2019, 115–16). However, the major efforts to theorise Black liberation as part of the socialist revolution were undertaken in this period by men. Only later, in works by Claudia Jones, Angela Davis, and others, was the strategic importance of Black women to socialist struggle fully elaborated. To properly address such contributions, this essay would need to be substantially stretched both thematically and chronologically. A discussion of how combined racial and gender oppressions were (or ought to be) understood in connection with the bourgeois-democratic revolution, the proletarian revolution, and 'permanentist' logic is necessary, but it is beyond the scope of the present article.

In discussing permanent revolution, the essay is respectful of the diversity of meanings with which the term was loaded until the Stalin-Trotsky split gave it an unprecedentedly divisive significance. I have differentiated permanentist trends from other modes of historical materialist writing by identifying several common features in permanent revolution discourse: (1) belief in the revolutionary agency of subaltern classes (workers and peasants); (2) emphasis on the non-progressive character of the bourgeois class; (3) political strategies predicated on foreshortening historical 'stages' (in particular, the period of capitalist development) by insurrectionary action. Permanent revolution can be used to describe a range of perspectives that share these common features, but which diverge in other important respects: most controversially, on the relative importance of the urban proletariat and rural peasantry in socialist revolution. The broad affinity in permanentist discourse nevertheless emerges from a shared methodology rooted in orthodox Marxism. György Lukács identified orthodox Marxism with a 'method' grounded in the recognition of a 'concrete totality' (1971, 1, 8), and Walter Rodney later elaborated that, by its nature, such a methodology could be applied 'independent of time and place' (1975). Similarly, Michael Löwy argued in praise of Trotsky that the healthiest source of revolutionary thought is '*the viewpoint of totality, perceiving capitalism and the class struggle as a world process*' (2006, 31).¹ The viewpoint of totality is one which Black Marxists, too, were committed to adopting as a requisite for engaging in thorough critiques of capitalism's racist structures. Black internationalism provided the grounds for a distinct strain of permanentist revolutionary strategizing.

Permanent revolution

The phrase permanent revolution first began to take on a definite political meaning in Marxist writing with Marx and Engels themselves. Marx's and Engels's writings amid the 1848 revolution in Germany clearly provide a blueprint for the permanentist perspective that came to underpin Marxism's revolutionary politics in the twentieth century (Löwy 1981; Draper, 1978). Their perspective contained a few key methodological characteristics that were later elaborated more fully into a theory of permanent revolution by Trotsky and were approximated too by many other Marxists from Europe and the African diaspora.

The permanentist perspective found in Marx's and Engels's writing on nineteenth-century Germany includes, first, a methodological insight: that social development, and therefore possibilities for revolutionary politics, can only be properly measured and understood in a world context. Strategy and perspectives proceed from an understanding of the deep interconnectedness of the capitalist economy and its embeddedness with non-capitalist forms. Second, the relative political strength of the industrial proletariat in each national context (for them, Germany) acts as a definite limit on the willingness of the national bourgeois to engage in revolutionary projects for social transformation. Whereas the absence of a politically effective proletariat enabled capitalists to play a progressive, revolutionary role in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this was less and less the case in the nineteenth. Third, the 'bourgeois-democratic' revolutions typically associated with demands for political freedom, legal equality, and reforms in land ownership, and 'proletarian' revolutions precipitating the transition to socialism, had become condensed into distinct moments of a single process.

These insights contribute to a conception of historical development as an uneven process. They help to produce a new spatial imaginary by proposing a more complex set of relationships between 'civilization' and 'backwardness', and they envision progress as unfolding not through the linear extension of new modes of production but also through the combination of novel forms with archaic ones – and therefore the rapid ossification of previously dynamic and revolutionary social forces. Only through such a materialist transcendence of linear economism can a perspective of permanent revolution be justified. As we shall see, these questions bear directly on the urgent strategic and practical problems faced by Black internationalists as they intervened in the world Communist movement.

These theories were hotly contested within the European-based Second International, which was the major incubator of Eurocentric and reformist conceptions of socialism as well as providing ideological training to many of the foremost figures of Marxist revolutionary theory: Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Gramsci. The question that ultimately broke the Second International and demonstrated its bankruptcy to the minority revolutionary-internationalist wing of social-democracy was the First World War. Long before 1914, however, debates raged over strategies for socialism, theories of imperialism, and the character of historical development itself. The Right and Centre of the International (represented by Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky respectively) drew mounting criticisms from a young Left, led initially by Luxemburg and later by Lenin and Trotsky.

A major flashpoint for quarrel not only with the Right of Social Democracy, but also of debate within this remarkably fecund Left, came in 1905 with the outbreak of revolutionary struggles in the Russian Empire. Luxemburg, Lenin, and Trotsky were united in recognising the immense significance of the 1905 Revolution, which ended in defeat but witnessed the first coherence of the *soviet* as a form of workers' democracy amid 'spontaneous' mass strikes that outstripped the struggles of German, French and British workers in their militancy and level of political engagement. For Lenin and Luxemburg, 1905 confirmed that the Western European proletariat should no longer be seen as the leading element in the class struggle, and that the bourgeois in Russia were incapable of leading a revolutionary-democratic struggle. Instead, Lenin argued that the small industrial proletariat and the large, impoverished peasantry in Russia would yield the leading elements for the revolutionary struggle and that it was through their agency that democracy and a tempered market economy would emerge (Skilling 1960).

Trotsky drew many of the same conclusions but took a position even further to the left – breaking completely from the version of Marxist orthodoxy preached in the Second International but in doing so, returning to the political writings of Marx and Engels to recover their openness to history's unpredictable pivots. Trotsky was not satisfied with a formula which described the revolutionary bloc as one of simple unity between the industrial proletariat and the poor peasants. He argued that within this alliance, the proletariat would have to be the leading element and would have to balance the petty-bourgeois aspirations of the peasantry with their own striving for socialist transformation. Furthermore, having led a revolution against imperialist tsarism, the working-class would not permit

the capitalist class to continue exploiting them in their factories. Instead, the conquest of political power by the workers would organically overgrow bourgeois-democratic reforms and proceed toward socialist construction. While such a process could never be completed by the Russian proletariat alone, the Russian revolution would ignite socialist revolutions in Western Europe whose success would feed back into the revolutionary process in Russia. European capitalism would break first at its weakest link, but this would simply mark the first step toward an all-European revolutionary process that would signal the end of capitalism on a world scale (Trotsky, 2004).

Trotsky's theory, set down most clearly in an essay titled 'Results and Prospects', was not widely accepted on publication in 1906 and it may not even have been read by Lenin. Yet when revolution broke out again in the Russian Empire, in 1917, it was Trotsky's perspective more than any other that was confirmed by the real course of events. Lenin, whose theory had also drawn on Marx's notion of 'uninterrupted' revolution, was driven by his astute estimation of political forces to shift further left, accommodating to a permanentist strategy that brought him into alliance with Trotsky. Only with the developing struggle for power during the mid-1920s, wherein Trotsky was ultimately pitched against Stalin, did the theory of permanent revolution become a point of controversy in the Communist International (Skilling 1961; Day & Gaido, 2009; Löwy, 2006).

One insight worth noting from this overview of permanentist perspectives is how Marxism's radical project has been repeatedly articulated from interstitial or marginal positions within the capitalist system. Both the Germany of the mid-nineteenth century that initially led Marx and Engels to their slogan of making the German revolution 'permanent', and the Russian Empire from which Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky emerged in the 1890s, were late-comers to capitalist development in Europe and retained significant (superstructural and economic) elements from their precapitalist history. Even before travelling outside of Europe, Marxism was articulated best by figures whose political practice forced them to contend with complex and uneven processes of historical development. This position of marginality was further reinforced for Marx, Luxemburg, and Trotsky by the racial marker of Jewishness. Even before the attempt to apply Marxism in settings of imperial domination and colonial oppression, it was a philosophy whose revolutionary kernel was seeded in the interstices of the emergent capitalist economy. Understood in this way, to speak of Marxism as unalterably Eurocentric and therefore applicable only to developed capitalist economies in 'the West' is to project a flattened vision of European development that scarcely matches the complex worlds that actually produced Marxism's seminal theorists.

This is not to say, of course, that Marxism had already transcended its European origins. The adaptation and re-application of Marxism in extra-European settings developed haltingly, and the 1920s and 1930s were key decades in this process. The turning of the Marxist gaze East certainly had precedent in the writings of Second International Leftists on colonialism and imperialism, but the realisation that colonised peoples would be leading agents of revolution at a global level came gradually to European Communists. One key moment in this realisation was the Chinese Revolution of 1927, which also clarified the life-and-death importance of debates over the 'permanent revolution'. The Revolution ended in a disastrous defeat for the Communist Party under direct instructions from the Comintern. The Chinese Revolution provided a flashpoint for the internal debates that wracked the International, and Trotsky brought a firmly permanentist perspective to his polemics (Davidson, 2006). The key issue was the proper relationship between the Chinese working-class and bourgeois anti-colonial forces. At the level of strategy, this problem was expressed in debates about the correct degree of co-ordination between the Chinese Communist Party and the nationalist Kuomintang. Trotsky, representing the Left of the International, condemned Comintern officials who ordered that the Communists should subordinate themselves to the discipline of the Nationalists. Consequently, when the Nationalists sought to secure their political dominance, they massacred Communists with very little resistance and the Party was driven from the cities. The Left

position was instead to operate temporary, short-term, and practical co-ordination with the Kuomintang but to maintain a sharp programmatic and organisational independence (Trotsky, 2008a).

In Trotsky's Left Opposition, the tragedy of the Chinese Revolution directly informed discussions of pan-African liberation: both were increasingly viewed as struggles immanent to the permanent revolution. Though Trotsky wrote scarcely and speculatively on the so-called Negro Question, he appeared sure of the relevance of permanent revolution in South Africa and the US. Already in 1924, addressing the Communist University for Toilers of the East, Trotsky laid out a perspective that broke completely from Second International stagism and its veiled chauvinism:

the centre of gravity of the revolutionary movement is being transferred wholly and entirely to the East. And then it will emerge that although a number of decades of Britain's capitalist development was necessary to act as a revolutionizing factor [...] then it will now be necessary for the revolution in the East to come back to Britain to smash through or, if necessary, smash up some thick skulls and give an impulse to the revolution of the European proletariat. (Trotsky, 1924).

As he sought to build the Left Opposition across the world, he corresponded with South African sympathisers who were eager to learn about the fate of the Chinese Revolution. In connection with this, he argued that 'the programme of the permanent revolution based on the incontestable historic experience of a number of countries can and must assume primary significance for the liberation movement of the Negro proletariat' (Trotsky, 1932). Finally, in the conversations conducted between Trotsky and members of the US Socialist Workers Party – Arne Swabeck, in 1932, and C.L.R. James, 1996) – Trotsky again spoke of permanent revolution as a theory that bore on the question of Black nationhood in the US (Trotsky, 1972). He agreed with the Jewish American Trotskyist Albert Weisbord that the question of Black self-determination 'belongs to the question of the permanent revolution in America', because it was through the political awakening of the Negroes – through their mobilisation for democratic demands – that they would be 'pushed on toward the class basis' (Trotsky, 1972, 14). With the awakening of class consciousness among the Black proletariat, the wider US proletariat would soon follow. Among the resolutions from Trotsky's 1939 conversation with James was a call to produce 'a theoretical study of the permanent revolution and the Negro peoples' (Trotsky, 1972, 38), moving beyond negative polemic with the Stalinist Communist Party and toward a positive articulation of the Trotskyist analysis. If the SWP failed to win Black workers, Trotsky insisted, 'the permanent revolution and all the rest would be only a lie' (1932).

For Trotsky, of course, this permanentist perspective on Black nationhood was at the same time a commitment to a socialist anti-colonial internationalism. 'We can and we must find a way to the consciousness of the Negro workers, the Chinese workers, the Indian workers,' he wrote to his supporters in 1932. It was to 'all the oppressed in the human ocean of the colored races' that 'the decisive word in the development of mankind' belonged (1932). As we shall see, such language echoed and anticipated Black Marxist theorising, which frequently adopted a permanentist register characterised by mistrust of bourgeois leaderships, an understanding of historical development as an uneven and contradictory process, and an understanding of global anticolonial and antiracist struggles as mutually dependent on revolutionary socialist politics in the West.

Claude McKay's anticolonialism

Perhaps, the most formative encounter between Black radicalism and the Marxism of the Communist International was the attendance in 1922 of Jamaican poet and writer Claude McKay at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International. Though not the most sophisticated political theorist of the period, McKay articulated to an esteemed audience of European revolutionaries many of the concerns that underpinned the writing of more esteemed radical theorists including Harry Haywood, W.E.B. Du Bois, and C.L.R. James. McKay drew on reading and conversations with a milieu of socialist Black nationalists in the US who had begun to combine anticolonial

internationalism with class-struggle politics and progressive views on gender and sexuality. McKay's work in the world of international Communism brought this organic Black radicalism toward a productive encounter with the European revolutionism forged in debates about the permanence or uninterruptedness of revolutionary process. He represents a pivotal figure in the articulation of an avowedly Marxist theorisation of the so-called Negro Question (Maxwell, 1999).

Born to a family of the Jamaican middle-peasantry and given the education of a Victorian colonial subject, McKay's earliest political expressions were written in dialect verses that expressed a very British kind of progressivism, combining Fabian socialism with rationalist scepticism and adoration of the mother country. Following his migration to the US, McKay operated in more firmly radical circles. As a student in Kansas, he joined 'a small group of white students with a socialist bent' (McKay, 1979, xvi). After dropping out of college, McKay moved to New York and through the 1910s became acquainted with Hubert Harrison, an influential orator and writer from the Virgin Islands who proselytised for socialism among the city's Black community.

Harrison was the most important figure of Black radical politics in the 1910s. He engaged in critical discussions with his SPA comrades about the race question, combining class with race militancy and thereby introducing a small but influential cadre of Black militants to the socialist Left (Cooper, 1987, 90). This formative influence on McKay's Marxism also criticised the SPA in other regards, notably their deterministic and teleological version of historical materialism. Harrison, according to his biographer, advocated a Marxism that was 'neither blindly dogmatic nor rigidly mechanical' (Perry, 2009, 197). In such articles as 'The White War and the Colored Races', written for his *New Negro* journal in 1918, Harrison offered an alternative to the SPA's white-centred radicalism, arguing that 'as long as black men are exploited by white men in Africa, so long must white men cut each other's throats over that exploitation. And thus, the selfish and ignorant white worker's destiny is determined by the hundreds of millions of those whom he calls "niggers.'" The First World War would weaken European control over the world and ultimately lead to 'the extension of political, social and industrial democracy to the twelve-hundred-million black and brown and yellow peoples of the world' (Perry, 2001, 206, 208). Harrison sought self-determination in terms that clearly tied the fates of oppressed peoples together and anticipated that this demand for democracy would lead to a complete social revolution. Through encounters with Harrison and his comrades, McKay abandoned the reformist, pro-British Fabianism of his early adulthood and embraced a vision of social transformation that approximated permanentist ideas about the socialist transition.

A similarly critical, and in certain respects unorthodox, influence on McKay's politics was the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). After the collapse of a short-lived marriage and restaurant business, McKay took a string of jobs which included factory work in New York, at which he joined the revolutionary syndicalist 'Wobblies'. Distinguishing themselves from the dominant labour organisation of the era, the American Federation of Labour, the Wobblies advocated maximum unity and militancy among the working-class, helping to affirm McKay's understanding that class-based organising was the best route for establishing solidarity between Black and white Americans (McKay, 1979, xvii). Yet nothing attracted McKay more to the US Left than the *Masses* magazine, a collectively owned journal of Greenwich Village radicalism. *The Masses* was as committed to high-quality literary output as it was to socialist politics. In particular, the magazine's sensitive and sympathetic illustrations of African American plight and its non-dogmatic radicalism proved magnetic for McKay (Cooper 91). In 1921–22, McKay would become a central character in these same circles as he took on a job as editor of the *Masses*' successor publication, *The Liberator*. In this role, McKay bridged the mostly white Workers' Party (the germ of the Communist Party of the USA) with the radical Black nationalist African Blood Brotherhood and the networks of US cultural modernism (McKay, 2007).

Between his associations with the US Left around the SP and the IWW in the 1910s, and his period at the *Liberator* in the early 1920s, McKay spent an important period in Britain. Here, for the first time, McKay was immersed in circles of devoted Marxist cadres who were versed in political theory and animated by debated about Communist strategy for party-building. Immediately on arriving in

London late in 1919, McKay launched himself into full-time party activity for the Workers' Socialist Federation (WSF), headed by Sylvia Pankhurst. In the WSF, he became familiar with a Marxist politics that was intensely suspicious of parliamentarism and reformist trade unionism, and which was one of the subjects of Lenin's polemic in *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. Because of its thoroughgoing revolutionism, the WSF also provided McKay with a platform to begin applying Marxian analyses to Black experience, with critiques of petty-bourgeois Black leaders and calls for an antiracist and anticolonial labour movement. At the same time, he socialised at the International Socialist Club, where a cosmopolitan community of political exiles and radicals from across Europe encouraged McKay to engage in his first thorough study of Marxist literature (James, 2017). Though McKay later insisted that he had never been wholly converted to Marxism, and his Marxian writings display a certain eclecticism, the political education he attained in London fundamentally shaped his politics for many years.

Even as an inexperienced author of Marxist analysis, McKay could articulate hugely predictive arguments about the significance of anticolonial struggle, the agency of colonised peoples, and their intersection with socialist struggles in the West. He was also a nuanced commentator on the existing Black leadership, which in 1919 was dominated by two figures: W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey. McKay welcomed Du Bois's combative opposition to Black conservatism, and wrote that the NAACP 'developed race-consciousness', made African Americans 'restive', and conducted laudable legal and educational campaigns. He nevertheless regarded the motivating element in the NAACP as 'wealthy and socially and politically influential [white] bourgeois of the North'. Among this group, he regarded Oswald Garrison Villard as exemplary: an isolated member of 'the American bourgeoisie' who counselled 'peace and moderation' in the battle between labour and capital. Though deeply respectful of Du Bois's intellectual ability and Villard's moral position, McKay differentiated sharply between the NAACP's ameliorative politics and his own radical socialism. Du Bois, McKay argued, was 'in spirit' opposed to socialism even as he 'flirted' with the idea from 'a narrow, opportunist-racial standpoint' and in this antagonistic relationship to socialism Du Bois was representative of the Black professional class (McKay, 1920). McKay's primary interest and hope was instead in the Black working-class – a political judgment that was also an aesthetic conviction which set him on a direct collision course with Du Bois, who reviewed McKay's first novel in 1928 with the famously harsh declaration that its 'filth' left him wanting to 'take a bath' (Du Bois, 1928).

Regarding Marcus Garvey, McKay appeared hesitant to articulate a full class analysis, but he understood the Garveyite movement as an expression of a deeply oppressed Black population 'from all parts of the world', which was growing in its resistance to colonialism and was precluded from participation in the movements of 'white workingmen'. The contradiction of the movement, however, was in its 'bourgeois-obsolete and fantastically utopian' programme (McKay, 1922). The Garveyite movement, in McKay's perspective, heralded a nationalist awakening of the Black masses, who he felt could be won via Garveyism to Communism. 'Nationalism', McKay argued, was for 'subject peoples' 'the open door to Communism.' Appealing to his mostly white, British, and radical readership, McKay insisted that socialists in the imperial metropole stand firmly in solidarity with the anticolonialism of the Irish, Indian, and other nationalist movements, emphasising the counter-revolutionary role of the British Empire and the permanentist logic of anticolonial struggle. 'No people who are strong enough to throw off an imperial yoke will tamely submit to a system of local capitalism', McKay (1920).

In McKay's writing on antiracist and anticolonial struggles, his emphasis on the centrality of these contradictions in world capitalism is paired with a mistrust of all bourgeois and petty-bourgeois leaderships. In connection to the Irish nationalist struggle, McKay criticised nationalist members of the Irish bourgeois, such as Erskine Childers, for legitimating their nationalist appeals by reference to race – laying claim to national rights by asserting Irish whiteness. He saw 'bourgeois nationalists' of this kind as akin to some Black bourgeois, who 'chafe under the foreign bit' principally because it is a restraint on their 'native talent for exploiting their own people.' McKay's 'sympathy with these Irish rebels' is thereby made critical and conditional and is secondary to his solidarity with 'the proletarian

revolutionists of the world'. Despite this bourgeois leadership, McKay argued that anti-colonial struggles of the kind that was unravelling in Ireland were of primary significance for socialists in the metropole. The achievement of Irish independence would, he insisted, prove to be 'an entering wedge directed straight to the heart of British capitalism' (McKay, 1921). In these writings, McKay combined a Leninist position on the self-determination of colonial nations with a permanentist understanding of the interconnection between anticolonial and socialist revolutions. He further added a special awareness of the leading role of colonial subjects in the world-revolutionary movement.

Yet McKay's vision of conjoined anticolonial and socialist revolutions attempted to appeal to a complex version of class solidarity. McKay considered that there existed a widespread nostalgia among workers for the land. In this regard, McKay's class feeling hinged not only on the understanding that the global proletariat shared common material interests, but on a sense of shared connection between peoples who resented being torn from their land and thrown into the crucible of industrial society. His 1920 essay 'Socialism and the Negro' ended by asking British workers whether they were content to consume raw materials produced by 'the slaves of Asia and Africa for the industries of their overcrowded cities, while the broad, fertile acres of Great Britain are held for hunting and other questionable pleasures.' His address to British workers was one which raised the question of land-ownership in a way that projected McKay's own yearning for life on the land onto the working-class as a whole.

The following year, McKay elaborated on this romantic appeal in an essay for *The Liberator*. In 'How Black Sees Green and Red', McKay insisted that English revolutionists failed to understand the Irish struggle because they naively imagined that the Irish would abandon the green of their national flag for the red flag of proletarian internationalism. McKay ridiculed the assumption that the Irish workers would struggle against the capitalist domination of Britain under the banner of a communist movement that retained the dominance of London. Such naïve class politics – characteristic of both the Left-Communists, who condemned the nuanced Leninist position on national self-determination, and the Fabians with their patronising attitude to imperial subjects – rendered the intercolonial alliances fostered among Irish, Chinese, Indian, and Black radicals inscrutable. For McKay, the source of this myopia was found, at least in part, in the peculiar character of English radicals, who were enamoured of the idea that England would be at the centre of 'International Communism', which they imagined as a suburban utopia. By contrast, revolutionists from Wales, Scotland, Ireland – and, the reader is invited to infer, Jamaica – were animated by 'the yearning hunger of the people for the land'. Certainly, McKay imagined communism as a return to 'the land' (McKay, 1921). Connected to McKay's program of socialist anticolonialism was therefore an imaginary that identified the overthrow of capitalism with the end of Western dominance and the romantic return to rurality.

McKay's Marxist sympathies ensured that his nationalist politics were grounded in and even superseded by a class-based commitment, but his romanticism meant that McKay's class politics in turn contained nostalgic elements of nationalist essentialism. Though the pastoral tone of McKay's writing was wholly his own, this perspective on European modernity had roots in the Black radical tradition. McKay's formative teacher Hubert Harrison expressed deep respect and even reverence for the cultural and intellectual achievements of colonised peoples and especially Africans. Whereas European Marxists might still imagine colonised peoples as being wrenched from 'a prehistoric, semi-barbaric state' (Trotsky, 1924), Harrison strove to learn the languages and to recover the scientific insights of colonised peoples (James, 1999, 129–30). McKay's nostalgic romanticism might therefore be read as deriving from a nascent decolonising cultural project in which European Marxists were regarded very much as students and not as teachers.

McKay's characteristic notes of nostalgic romanticism were nevertheless absent in his most influential pronouncements about Marxism and race, which he made as a guest at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International. In his speech to the Congress, McKay asserted the class-based commonality between Black, white, and yellow races – his own race, McKay said, was 'a race of

toilers, hewers of wood and drawers of water, that belongs to the most oppressed, exploited, and suppressed section of the working class of the world'. Yet he directed unflinching criticism at his white American comrades, whose 'demonstrations of prejudice' represented 'the greatest difficulty that the Communists of America have got to overcome' (McKay, 1923). In this intervention, McKay was building on a body of knowledge developed collectively among Black radicals in the US. Extending his criticism in a short book that he wrote while in the USSR, McKay quoted extensively from his comrade W.A. Domingo to connect the white blindspot on race with major theoretical, political and strategic questions. 'Capitalism', Domingo had written in his *Emancipator* newspaper, 'is as deeply rooted in Africa as in Europe', meaning that 'this system cannot be eliminated in England and continue to exist on the Island of Haiti' (McKay, 1979, 39). Here, the argument of Domingo/McKay about the centrality of anticolonial revolutions to the socialist struggle recalls Trotsky's definition of proletarian internationalism as emerging from the 'unbreakable *mutual dependence*' between metropole and colony (Trotsky, 1930). Their argument proceeds from the standpoint of totality.

In such arguments, Black Marxists positioned themselves as defenders of the principles of Marx and the Russian Bolsheviks, whom Domingo/McKay praised for 'supporting and encouraging the oppressed of all races, creeds, and nationalities' (McKay, 1979, 39). In the absence of such interracial and internationalist politics, McKay feared that 'the international bourgeoisie would use the Negro race as their trump card in their fight against the world revolution', and this danger was especially present in the US where 'the American capitalists are setting out to mobilize the entire black race of America for the purpose of fighting organized labor' (McKay, 1923). The Black Marxist critique of white ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism was both theoretical and strategic. Theoretical, because it addressed the how and the why of proletarian internationalism in often sophisticated terms that drew connections between colonialism, imperialism, uneven development, and regimes of racial segregation. Strategic, because it posited that colonised peoples were active agents on the world stage who had the capacity to make or break the socialist revolution.

These arguments reached sympathetic ears in Russia, from where McKay 'articulated *collectively*' with Trotsky 'a permanent revolution that positioned blacks at the vanguard of transnational insurgency' (Holcomb, 2007, 152). When McKay addressed a querying letter to Trotsky, the leading Bolshevik's reply mixed his developmentalist convictions with a serious attention to Black agency. He characterised 'Negroes' and colonial 'natives' as conservative insofar as 'they continue to live in their accustomed economic conditions.' But the reliance of European militarists on colonial troops would act as a rapid process of proletarianization, tearing colonised and racialised peoples from their 'accustomed conditions' and generating a radical new political awareness. 'Revolutionary ideas', Trotsky wrote in a characteristically theoretical flourish, 'find rapid access to a consciousness thrown off its balance'. The opening of new political possibilities might emerge from the colonies, but Trotsky maintained that these could only be given a proper revolutionary expression through a recognition of 'the identity of interests' between 'the Negro masses' and 'the masses of the whole world, and in the first place with the destiny of the European working class' (Trotsky, 1974, 354–6). Trotsky's missive registered the revolutionary potential of Black and colonised peoples, grounding it in an understanding that conditions of economic underdevelopment and extreme political domination ('backwardness') might help to rapidly crystallise revolutionary formations. 'Backwardness', in this historical dialectic, generates precocity. These ideas became a common theme of Trotsky's writing and speeches (Trotsky, 1924) and was given its fullest elaboration in his *The History of the Russian Revolution*, where he described 'the privilege of historical backwardness' (Trotsky, 2008b, 4).

McKay lacked Trotsky's (and indeed Harrison's) erudition as a political theorist and had few ambitions to become a politician. As such, his political writings sometimes displayed crudity, idiosyncrasy, and even ignorance – but McKay drew ideas from a community of Black radicals who made important interventions into debates about the character of proletarian internationalism. Together with the Surinamese-American Communist Otto Huiswoud at the Fourth Congress of the

Comintern, McKay helped to shape the 'Thesis on the Negro Question', in which the Communists declared Africa and its Diaspora central to the world revolution and called for the convocation of a Communist pan-African congress (Adi, 2008, 238). After this point, McKay became increasingly marginal to the world Communist movement, and he evolved into a prominent opponent of it. The more revolutionary thrust of McKay's early writing was nevertheless sustained by other figures of the international Communist movement, who continued to theorise Black revolution in language girded by a dialectical, permanentist understanding of historical development.

The Black Belt Thesis and permanent revolution in the US

At the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern in 1928, the position of the Communists on the Negro Question in the US finally took a more definite and elaborated form than the previous commitment to a fight for equality in law and civil society. Part of the difficulty in articulating a position on the matter was the paucity of material in the writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin on Black oppression in any context. Marx and Engels had been very engaged with the American Civil War, championing abolition as an essential prerequisite for communism. However, they did not produce authoritative analyses of post-abolition America, beyond accurately predicting a huge impetus to capitalist industry and working-class organisation (Blackburn, 2011, 55–60). Lenin, meanwhile, had briefly discussed or referenced African American oppression in various writings, where he typically regarded them as a 'subject nation' (Lenin, 1975, 25) or otherwise as one of many diverse 'national and colonial questions', among which were also the contested territory of Alsace-Lorraine, the Irish independence struggle, the 'Balkan experience', 'China-Korea-Japan', and the 'struggle against Pan-Islamism' (Lenin, 1975, 20–21). In summary, none of the major authorities in European Marxism had set out a firm political programme for Black people in the US. The attempt to do so was not helped by the apparent ignorance and prejudices of white comrades in the American party, undermining the authority of an already divided and politically isolated organisation.

However unsatisfactory, the 1928 resolution and its 1930 corollary provided an unprecedentedly detailed and ambitious outline of a Marxist theory of Black liberation. At the centre of this resolution was an understanding that the impoverished and despised position of African Americans, especially in the South, was a legacy of the defeated popular-democratic movement which had driven Reconstruction forward. Much as in Germany in 1848, Marx and Engels grew to identify with the radical democracy and focused sharply on the industrial working-class as a self-emancipating actor, so Marxists came to think about Reconstruction as a process of democratic revolution resisted by the slaveocracy and betrayed by the industrial bourgeois. The mantle of this radical-democratic impulse was afterward taken up by the self-organised activity of the labouring class and the civil rights agitation of Black workers and farmers.

According to the Comintern, despite the interracial character of this radical-democratic struggle, the surviving vestiges of Southern underdevelopment also meant that the Black freedom struggle had a separatist and nationalist character, which ought to be recognised programmatically by raising the slogan of self-determination for the Black Belt of Southern counties where African Americans formed a demographic majority. Confusingly, this 'defence' of the right to a self-determination which very few African Americans had demanded was coupled with a call to intensify the struggle for legal and political equality in the US.² Whereas previously, white socialists often minimised the distinctiveness of Black oppression by regarding African Americans simply as members of the working-class, with no special circumstances of their own, the Comintern stressed the need for US Communists to follow in the footsteps of Ida B. Wells and W.E.B. Du Bois in taking up the fight against lynching.

However ineptly drafted, the Comintern resolutions drew from the serious Leninist argument that 'the question of Blacks in the South [w]as one of an uncompleted agrarian and bourgeois democratic revolution' (Haywood 1978, 224). Given the Stalinised character of the Comintern by 1928, and the narrowly Trotskyist association the phrase had assumed in the Communist Party's

faction fights of the mid-1920s, permanent revolution was regarded as anathema by the framers and supporters of the Black Belt Thesis. Nevertheless, the permanentist strain of the strategy is unmistakable, especially given the historical justification by reference to American uneven development. While recognising that many of the struggles of African Americans were bourgeois-democratic (for legal equality, against extra-legal violence, for fair access to waged labour), the Black Belt Thesis argued that the only impetus for resolving such issues was coming from the Black working-class, debt-bonded peons, and poor farmers. As such, while Lenin and later Communists figured racial oppression as a hangover from capitalist slavery, they also recognised that the brutalisation and exploitation of Black people was structurally constitutive of American capitalism, which was incapable of assimilating African Americans into its crisis-ridden system in the way that it had more successfully assimilated waves of migrants from Europe, Asia, and elsewhere.

Though a breakthrough for Marxist theorising and organising against racism, the Black Belt Thesis was generally disliked, including among Black radicals. The combination of slogans for equality and national separation proved confusing for many, including Grace Campbell, who at this time was affiliated with the Lovestonite Right Opposition in the American Communist movement (McDuffie, 2011, 47). Campbell and the Lovestoneites argued that the vestiges of slavery which provided the basis for a national-revolutionary struggle were in the process of disappearing. As such, the Party was wrong to characterise Black struggle as part of a national liberation effort and the struggle for legal and social equality within the US 'was an inherently revolutionary strategy' and not a reformist one. Despite Campbell's opposition to the Black Belt Thesis, her account of racism shared fundamental assumptions. She concurred that the defeat of Reconstruction and the failure of reform efforts since meant that 'the task of destroying the slave survivals and transforming the South from a semi-feudal /slave society into a popular democracy was left to' the multiracial working class (Lindsey, 2019, 116). This argument – articulated from a factional position sharply opposed to the Trotskyist Left Opposition, and against the Black Belt Thesis – echoes the kinds of argument championed by Marx and Engels in the process of the 1848 struggle.

Unsurprisingly, the faction most willing to make explicit the connection between theories of Black liberation and 'permanentist' writing was the Left Opposition. In a 1931 document titled 'Communism and the Negro', white Trotskyist Max Shachtman provided the most detailed assessment yet of the connection between contemporary racism and the defeat of the radical democracy during Reconstruction. Shachtman emphasised the agency of the enslaved in the achievement of abolition and considered that the radical governments of the Reconstruction period represented a 'forcible imposition' (Shachtman, 2003, xxv) of limited liberal norms on the South by an unstable cross-class coalition which ultimately proved threatening to the Northern bourgeois. Shachtman fiercely denied that any section of the capitalist class was capable of producing effective reform for African Americans (Shachtman, 2003, 24–25). In doing so, he likely drew on the experience of the Chinese Revolution and controversies in that context about the role of the bourgeoisie in democratic movements.

This paper was drafted in preparation for discussions with Trotsky about the program of his American supporters, among whom C.L.R. James made the most ambitious and clear efforts to link Black liberation with permanent revolution. For James, 'Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution', in its US application, meant 'the telescoping of the industrial, agricultural, and social revolution in the South' (69) – that is, James argued that the theory of permanent revolution meant that 'the Negro struggle for democratic rights [...] is a direct part of the struggle for socialism' (C.L.R. James, 1996, 71). He also amended Shachtman's thesis in one major respect, whereas Shachtman saw the integration of African Americans into the industrial economy as a process which stripped the movement for Black rights of its nationalistic character, James argued the opposite. 'To the degree that the Negroes are more integrated into industry and unions', he was at pains to emphasise, 'their consciousness of racial oppression and their resentment against it became heavier, not less' (C.L.R. James, 1996, 68).

James wrote these lines in 1943, having already begun his slow drift away from Trotskyism. His suggestion that permanent revolution was applicable in the US context nevertheless girded the policy of the leading Trotskyist organisation in the US, the Socialist Workers' Party, for several decades. Given the slow destruction of sharecropping in Southern agriculture, the immense development of the Southern economy, and the end of Jim Crow laws, the permanentist analysis of James and the SWP invites critique. Neil Davidson, for instance, finds that it necessarily detaches permanent revolution 'from any basis in uneven and combined development', making it 'virtually synonymous with [the concept] of socialist revolution as such' (Davidson, 2012, 307). Christopher Phelps, meanwhile, has observed that the postwar civil rights movement undermined claims that 'intermediary classes' (students and the middle class) could not play a key role in Black liberation struggles. Moreover, he points out that under pressure from a mass movement, 'even the dominant wing of the American ruling class [...] back[ed] haltingly away from its toleration of juridical segregation' (Shachtman, 2003, xx).

The application of a permanentist logic to racial oppression in the US has therefore, given hindsight, been regarded as dogmatic or anachronistic. However, it was through the attempt to construct a Marxist analysis of Black oppression that was specifically rooted in ideas of uneven development and uninterrupted or permanent revolution that Marxists came to theorise racism as integral to the global capitalist economy and the American social structure. Only by basing themselves on these ideas did later traditions of socialist radicalism, especially among African Americans, come to articulate new understandings of capitalism's racialised character. To do so, they drew on a continuous line of Marxian logic which (however regularly transformed, imperfectly applied, and continually debated) connects Marx and Trotsky with Harrison and McKay, Campbell and James.

This organic convergence is epitomised in W.E.B. Du Bois's effort, after his Marxist turn, to fundamentally revise dominant scholarly understandings of Reconstruction along the lines anticipated in the Communist movement by various figures, including Campbell and Shachtman. For Noel Ignatin, it was precisely Du Bois's argument in *Black Reconstruction* that the revolutionary-democratic movement evolved toward socialism that marked him as a historian in the tradition of Bolshevism.³ Nor was Du Bois's permanentist history of Reconstruction an altogether isolated convergence with the Trotskyist tradition. Du Bois's expression of global race and class dynamics shares a metaphor and a political perspective with a previously quoted passage of Trotsky's (1932), Trotsky had written of the 'human ocean of the colored races' as possessing the 'decisive word' in human history, and two years later Du Bois wrote on the global colour line in the same oceanic terms:

That dark and vast sea of human labor in China and India, the South Seas and all Africa; in the West Indies and Central America and in the United States [...] shares a common destiny; it is despised and rejected by race and color; paid a wage below the level of decent living; driven, beaten, prisoned and enslaved in all but name [...] Here is the real modern labor problem. [...] 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. (Du Bois, 1928, 15-16.)

Du Bois was certainly never a Trotskyist, nor was he an uncomplicated champion of the wider permanentist tradition of the Second International. But his work testifies that the socialist logic within democratic struggles was a theme that permeated Marxist theorising both within the European Communist movement and beyond it.

Notes

1. The value of such a standpoint for Black liberation was also recognised by Rodney, who wrote glowingly of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* (Rodney, 2018).
2. *The 1928 and 1930 Comintern Resolutions on the Black National Question in the United States* (Washington DC: Revolutionary Review Press, 1975). See also Jacob Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919-1929* (Weiss, 2014).

3. Noel Ignatin, 'The Meaning of Reconstruction: A Study Guide and Interpretation', <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/sojournertruth/reconstudy.pdf>.

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