

SEVEN

After Ten Years

From CLR James on the 'Negro Question'
 Scott McLemee, ed.
 Univ. of Mississippi Press 1996

THE REVOLUTIONARY ANSWER
 TO THE NEGRO PROBLEM IN
 THE UNITED STATES (1948)

The decay of capitalism on a world scale, the rise of the CIO in the United States, and the struggle of the Negro people, have precipitated a tremendous battle for the minds of the Negro people and for the minds of the population in the US as a whole over the Negro question. During the last few years certain sections of the bourgeoisie, recognizing the importance of this question, have made a powerful theoretical demonstration of their position, which has appeared in *The American Dilemma* by Gunnar Myrdal, a publication that took a quarter of a million dollars to produce. Certain sections of the sentimental petty bourgeoisie have produced their spokesmen, one of whom is Lillian Smith. That has produced some very strange fruit, which however has resulted in a book which has sold some half a million copies over the last year or two. The Negro petty bourgeoisie, radical and concerned with Communism, has also made its bid in the person of Richard Wright, whose books have sold over a million copies. When books on such a controversial question as the Negro question reach the stage of selling half a million copies it means that they have left the sphere of literature and have now reached the sphere of politics.

We can compare what we have to say that is new by comparing it to previous positions on the Negro question in the socialist movement. The proletariat, as we know, must lead the struggles of all the oppressed and all those who are persecuted by capitalism. But this has been interpreted in the past—and by some very good socialists too—in the following sense: the independent struggles of the Negro people have not got much more than an episodic value and, as a matter of fact, can constitute a great danger not only to the Negroes themselves, but to the organized labor movement. The real leadership of the Negro struggle must rest in the hands of organized labor and of the Marxist party. Without that the Negro struggle is not only weak, but is likely to cause difficulties for the Negroes and dangers to organized labor. This, as I say, is the position held by many socialists in the past. Some great socialists in the United States have been associated with this attitude.

We, on the other hand, say something entirely different.

We say, number one, that the Negro struggle, the independent Negro struggle, has a vitality and a validity of its own; that it has deep historic roots in the past of America and in present struggles; it has an organic political perspective, along which it is travelling, to one degree or another, and everything shows that at the present time it is travelling with great speed and vigor.

We say, number two, that this independent Negro movement is able to intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation, despite the fact that it is waged under the banner of democratic rights, and is not led necessarily either by the organized labor movement or the Marxist party. We say, number three, and this is the most important, that it is able to exercise a powerful influence upon the revolutionary proletariat, that it has got a great contribution to make to the development of the proletariat in the United States, and that it is in itself a constituent part of the struggle for socialism. In this way we challenge directly any attempt to subordinate or to push to the rear the social and political significance of the independent Negro struggle for democratic rights. That is our position. It was the position of Lenin thirty years ago. It was the position of Trotsky which he fought for during many years. It has been concretized by the general class struggle in the United States, and the tremendous struggles of the Negro people. It has been sharpened and refined by political controversy in our movement, and best of all it has had the benefit of three or four years of practical application in the Negro struggle and in the class struggle by the Socialist Workers' Party during the past few years.

Now if this position has reached the stage where we can put it forward in the shape that we propose, that means that to understand it should be by now simpler than before; and by merely observing the Negro question, the Negro people, rather, the struggles they have carried on, their ideas, we are able to see the roots of this position in a way that was difficult to see ten or even fifteen years ago. The Negro people, we say, on the basis of their own experiences, approach the conclusions of Marxism. And I will have briefly to illustrate this as has been shown in the Resolution.

First of all, on the question of imperialist war. The Negro people do not believe that the last two wars, and the one that may overtake us, are a result of the need to struggle for democracy, for freedom of the persecuted peoples by the American bourgeoisie. They cannot believe that.

On the question of the state, what Negro, particularly below the Mason-Dixon line, believes that the bourgeois state is a state above all classes, serving the needs of all the people? They may not formulate their belief in Marxist terms, but their experience drives them to reject this shibboleth of bourgeois democracy.

On the question of what is called the democratic process, the Negroes do not believe that grievances, difficulties of sections of the population, are solved by discussions, by voting, by telegrams to Congress, by what is known as the "American way."

Finally, on the question of political action, the American bourgeoisie preaches that Providence in its divine wisdom has decreed that there should be two political parties in the United States, not one, not three, not four, just two: and also in its kindness, Providence has shown that these two parties should be one, the Democratic Party and the other, the Republican, to last from now until the end of time.

That is being challenged by increasing numbers of people in the United States. But the Negroes more than ever have shown it—and any knowledge of their press and their activities tells us that they are willing to make the break completely with that conception.

As Bolsheviks we are jealous, not only theoretically but practically, of the primary role of the organized labor movement in all fundamental struggles against capitalism. That is why for many years in the past this position on the Negro question has had some difficulty in finding itself thoroughly accepted, particularly in the revolutionary movement, because there is this difficulty—what is the relation between this movement and the primary role of the proletariat—particularly because so many Negroes, and most

disciplined, hardened, trained, highly developed sections of the Negroes, are today in the organized labor movement.

First the Negro struggles in the South are not merely a question of struggles of Negroes, important as those are. It is a question of the reorganization of the whole agricultural system in the United States, and therefore a matter for the proletarian revolution and the reorganization of society on socialist foundations.

Secondly, we say in the South that although the embryonic unity of whites and Negroes in the labor movement may seem small and there are difficulties in the unions, yet such is the decay of Southern society and such the fundamental significance of the proletariat, particularly when organized in labor unions, that this small movement is bound to play the decisive part in the revolutionary struggles that are inevitable.

Thirdly, there are one and a quarter million Negroes, at least, in the organized labor movement.

On these fundamental positions we do not move one inch. Not only do we not move, we strengthen them. But there still remains in question: what is the relationship of the independent Negro mass movement to the organized labor movement? And here we come immediately to what has been and will be a very puzzling feature unless we have our basic position clear.

Those who believed that the Negro question is in reality, purely and simply, or to a decisive extent, merely a class question, pointed with glee to the tremendous growth of the Negro personnel in the organized labor movement. It grew in a few years from three hundred thousand to one million; it is now one and a half million. But to their surprise, instead of this lessening and weakening the struggle of the independent Negro movement, *the more the Negroes went into the labor movement, the more capitalism incorporated them into industry, the more they were accepted in the union movement. It is during that period, since 1940, that the independent mass movement has broken out with a force greater than it has ever shown before.*

That is the problem that we have to face, that we have to grasp. We cannot move forward and we cannot explain ourselves unless we have it clearly. And I know there is difficulty with it. I intend to spend some time on it, because if that is settled, all is settled. The other difficulties are incidental. If, however, this one is not clear, then we shall continually be facing difficulties which we shall doubtless solve in time.

Now Lenin has handled this problem and in the Resolution we have quoted him. He says that the dialectic of history is such that small

independent nations, small nationalities, which are powerless—get the word, please—*powerless*, in the struggle against imperialism *nevertheless* can act as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli, which can bring on to the scene the real power against imperialism—the socialist proletariat.

Let me repeat it please. Small groups, nations, nationalities, themselves powerless against imperialism, nevertheless can act as one of the ferments, one of the bacilli which will bring on to the scene the real fundamental force against capitalism—the socialist proletariat.

In other words, as so often happens from the Marxist point of view from the point of view of the dialectic, this question of the *leadership* is very complicated.

What Lenin is saying is that although the fundamental force is the proletariat, although these groups are powerless, although the proletariat has got to lead them, it does not by any means follow that they cannot do anything until the proletariat actually comes forward to lead them. *He says exactly the opposite is the case.*

They, by their agitation, resistance and the political developments that they can initiate, can be the means whereby the proletariat is brought on to the scene.

Not always, and every time, not the sole means, but one of the means. That is what we have to get clear.

Now it is very well to see it from the point of view of Marxism which developed these ideas upon the basis of European and Oriental experiences. Lenin and Trotsky applied this principle to the Negro question in the United States. What *we* have to do is to make it concrete, and one of the best means of doing so is to dig into the history of the Negro people in the United States, and to see the relationship that has developed between them and revolutionary elements in past revolutionary struggles.

For us the center must be the Civil War in the United States and I intend briefly now to make some sharp conclusions and see if they can help us arrive at a clearer perspective. Not for historical knowledge, but to watch the movement as it develops before us, helping us to arrive at a clearer perspective as to this difficult relationship between the independent Negro movement and the revolutionary proletariat. The Civil War was a conflict between the revolutionary bourgeoisie and the Southern plantocracy. That we know. That conflict was inevitable. But for twenty to twenty-five years before the Civil War actually broke out, the masses of the Negroes in the South, through the underground railroad, through revolts, as Aptheker

has told us, and by the tremendous support and impetus that they gave to the revolutionary elements among the Abolitionists, absolutely prevented the reactionary bourgeoisie—revolutionary later—absolutely prevented the bourgeoisie and the plantocracy from coming to terms as they wanted to do. In 1850 these two made a great attempt at a compromise. What broke that compromise? It was the Fugitive Slave Act. They could prevent everything else for the time being, but they could not prevent the slaves from coming, and the revolutionaries in the North from assisting them. So that we find that here in the history of the United States such is the situation of the masses of the Negro people and their readiness to revolt at the slightest opportunity, that as far back as the Civil War, in relation to the American bourgeoisie, they formed a force which *initiated* and *stimulated* and *acted as a ferment*.

That is point number one.

Point number two. The Civil War takes its course as it is bound to do. Many Negroes and their leaders make an attempt to get incorporated into the Republican Party and to get their cause embraced by the bourgeoisie. And what happens? The bourgeoisie refuses. It doesn't want to have Negroes emancipated. Point number three. As the struggle develops, such is the situation of the Negroes in the United States, that the emancipation of the slaves becomes *an absolute necessity*, politically, organizationally, and from a military point of view.

The Negroes are incorporated into the battle against the South. Not only are they incorporated here, but later they are incorporated also into the military government which smashes down the remnants of resistance in the Southern states. But, when this is done, the Negroes are deserted by the bourgeoisie, *and there falls upon them a very terrible repression*.

That is the course of development in the central episode of American history.

Now if it is so in the Civil War, we have the right to look to see what happened in the War of Independence. It is likely—it is not always certain—but it is *likely* that we shall see there some *anticipations* of the logical development which appeared in the Civil War. They are there. The Negroes begin by demanding their rights. They say if you are asking that the British free you, then we should have our rights, and furthermore, slavery should be abolished. The American bourgeoisie didn't react very well to that. The Negroes insisted—those Negroes who were in the North—insisted that they should be allowed to join the Army of Independence. They were refused.

But later Washington found that it was imperative to have them, and four thousand of them fought among the thirty thousand soldiers of Washington. They gained certain rights after independence was achieved. Then sections of the bourgeoisie who were with them deserted them. And the Negro movement collapsed. We see exactly the same thing but more intensified in the Populist movement. There was a powerful movement of one and one quarter of a million Negroes in the South (the Southern Tenant Farmers' Association). They joined the Populist movement and were in the extreme left wing of this movement, when Populism was discussing whether it should go on with the Democratic Party or make the campaign as a third party. The Negroes voted for the third party and for all the most radical planks in the platform. They fought with the Populist movement. But when Populism was defeated, there fell upon the Negroes between 1896 and about 1910 the desperate, legalized repression and persecution of the Southern states.

Some of us think it is fairly clear that the Garvey movement came and looked to Africa because there was no proletarian movement in the United States to give it a lead, to do for this great eruption of the Negroes what the Civil War and the Populist movement had done for the insurgent Negroes of those days. And now what can we see today? Today the Negroes in the United States are organized as never before. There are more than half a million in the NAACP, and in addition to that, there are all sorts of Negro groups and organizations—the churches in particular—*every single one of which is dominated by the idea that each organization must in some manner or another contribute to the emancipation of the Negroes from capitalist humiliation and from capitalist oppression.* So that the independent Negro movement that we see today and which we see growing before our eyes is nothing strange. It is nothing new. *It is something that has always appeared in the American movement at the first sign of social crisis.*

It represents a climax to the Negro movements that we have seen in the past. From what we have seen in the past, we would expect it to have its head turned towards the labor movement. And not only from a historical point of view but today concrete experience tells us that the masses of the Negro people today look upon the CIO with a respect and consideration that they give to no other social or political force in the country. To anyone who knows the Negro people, who reads their press—and I am not speaking here specially of the Negro workers—if you watch the Negro petty bourgeoisie—reactionary, reformist types as some of them are in all their propaganda, in all their agitation—whenever they are in any difficulties,

you can see them leaning toward the labor movement. As for the masses of Negroes, they are increasingly pro-labor every day. So that it is not only Marxist ideas; it is not only a question of Bolshevik-Marxist analysis. It is not only a question of the history of Negroes in the US.

The actual concrete facts before us show us, and anyone who wants to see, this important conclusion, that the Negro movement logically and historically and concretely is headed for the proletariat. That is the road it has always taken in the past, the road to the revolutionary forces. Today the proletariat is that force. And if these ideas that we have traced in American revolutionary crises have shown some power in the past, such is the state of the class struggle today, such the antagonisms between bourgeoisie and proletariat, such, too, the impetus of the Negro *movement toward the revolutionary forces*, which we have traced in the past, is stronger today than ever before. So that we can look upon this Negro movement not only for what it has been and what it has been able to do—we are able to know as Marxists by our own theory and our examination of American history that it is headed for the proletarian movement, that it must go there. There is nowhere else for it to go. And further we can see that if it doesn't go there, the difficulties that the Negroes have suffered in the past when they were deserted by the revolutionary forces, those will be ten, one hundred, ten thousand times as great as in the past. The independent Negro movement, which is boiling and moving, must find its way to the proletariat. If the proletariat is not able to support it, the repression of past times when the revolutionary forces failed the Negroes will be infinitely, I repeat infinitely, more terrible today.

Therefore our consideration of the independent Negro movement does not lessen the significance of the proletarian—the essentially proletarian—leadership. Not at all. It includes it. We are able to see that the mere existence of the CIO, its mere existence, despite the fakery of the labor leadership on the Negro question, as on all other questions, is a protection and a stimulus to the Negroes. We are able to see and I will show in a minute that the Negroes are able by their activity to draw the revolutionary elements and more powerful elements in the proletariat to their side. We are coming to that. But we have to draw and emphasize again and again this important conclusion. If—and we have to take these theoretical questions into consideration—if the proletariat is defeated, if the CIO is destroyed, then there will fall upon the Negro people in the US such a repression, such persecution, comparable to nothing that they have seen in the past.

We have seen in Germany and elsewhere the barbarism that capitalism is capable of in its death agony. The Negro people in the US offer a similar opportunity to the American bourgeoisie. The American bourgeoisie have shown their understanding of the opportunity the Negro question gives them to disrupt and to attempt to corrupt and destroy the labor movement.

But the development of capitalism itself has not only given the independent Negro movement this fundamental and sharp relation with the proletariat. It has created Negro proletarians and placed them as proletarians in what were once the most oppressed and exploited masses. But in auto, steel, and coal, for example, these proletarians have now become the vanguard of the workers' struggle and have brought a substantial number of Negroes to a position of primacy in the struggle against capitalism. The backwardness and humiliation of the Negroes that shoved them into these industries is the very thing which today is bringing them forward, and they are in the very vanguard of the proletarian movement from the very nature of the proletarian struggle itself. Now, how does this complicated interrelationship, the Leninist interrelationship express itself? Henry Ford could write a very good thesis on that if he were so inclined.

The Negroes in the Ford plant were incorporated by Ford: first of all he wanted them for the hard, rough work. I am also informed by the comrades from Detroit he was very anxious to play a paternalistic role with the Negro petty bourgeoisie. He wanted to show them that he was not the person that these people said he was—look! he was giving Negroes opportunities in his plant. Number three, he was able thus to create divisions between whites and Negroes that allowed him to pursue his anti-union, reactionary way.

What has happened within the last few years that is changed? The mass of the Negroes in the River Rouge plant, I am told, are one of the most powerful sections of the Detroit proletariat. They are leaders in the proletarian struggle, not the stooges Ford intended them to be.

Not only that, they act as leaders not only in the labor movement as a whole but in the Negro community. It is what they say that is decisive there. Which is very sad for Henry. And the Negro petty bourgeois have followed the proletariat. They are now going along with the labor movement: they have left Ford too. It is said that he has recognized it at last and that he is not going to employ any more Negroes. He thinks he will do better with women. But they will disappoint him too . . .

Let us not forget that in the Negro people, there sleep and are now awakening passions of a violence exceeding, perhaps, as far as these things

can be compared, anything among the tremendous forces that capitalism has created. Anyone who knows them, who knows their history, is able to talk to them intimately, watches them at their own theaters, watches them at their dances, watches them in their churches, reads their press with a discerning eye, must recognize that although their social force may not be able to compare with the social force of a corresponding number of organized workers, the hatred of bourgeois society and the readiness to destroy it when the opportunity should present itself, rests among them to a degree greater than in any other section of the population in the United States.