

The Crisis of Negro Reformism and the Growth Of Nationalism

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Brother Harry Haywood is the author of the classical Marxist interpretation of Black Nationalism, *Negro Liberation* (International Publishers, 1948). The following work is a chapter from his unpublished book, "Towards a Revolutionary Program for Negro Freedom," which he wrote in collaboration with Gwendolyn Midlo. In the latter manuscript Brother Haywood combines his perennial fine tools of theory & research with new soulful applications that, in our opinion, makes it immeasurably more relevant than his erstwhile treatise. –the editors–

The present-day Negro movement is characterized by the crisis of Negro reformism and the growth of Black nationalism. There are three main factors feeding this development: 1) The world-wide anti-colonialist upsurge; 2) The effects of growing. Economic crisis among the basic masses of Negroes; 3) Erosion of the myth of imminent, peaceful democratic integration.

THE ANTI-COLONIALIST UPSURGE

The international crisis of the imperialist system has had a profound impact upon U.S. Negroes. The world system of imperialism, with the United States as its leading force and arbitrator, is in retreat, fighting a rearguard battle to maintain and shore up the fragmented status quo already eroded beyond repair by the thrust of ascending socialism and victorious colonial revolution. The colonial system, the main prop of what is euphemistically called, "The Free World," is in an advanced stage of disintegration. White supremacy and its ideological rational, the spurious doctrine of racial inferiority, is collapsing before the forward surge of the new sovereign nations of Africa and Asia and the heroic struggles of the peoples of Latin America.

The strength of the Negro Liberation Movement, its growing momentum and impact, lies in the fact that it is the counterpart of this anti-colonial revolution which is shaking the world. Its particular significance lies in the fact that it is a revolt against what amounts to semi-colonial oppression in the heart of the world's leading imperialist country. Columnist Joseph Alsop [end p. 203] is close to the mark when he characterized the "Negro protest" as a "neo-colonial revolution," and comments that "this process more and more resembles the end of a colonial period." [1]

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

Aside from the tremendous impact of the colonial revolution, we must take into account the internal social and economic factors powering the present Negro movement: the relative and absolute economic deterioration of the status of the Negro people resulting from frequent recessions combined with the inroads of automation which have hit the Negro masses disproportionately. Thus, the Negro worker is caught in the job crisis with the percentage of unemployed more than double that of the whites. The widening gap between Negroes and whites in U.S. society can be summarized with a few significant statistics:

The median Negro family income is 45% below the median white family income. Moreover, in 1952, this gap was “only” 43%, which shows the direction in which things are going. [2].

Negro unemployment is two and a half times white unemployment. Among youth this gap is even wider. At least one-half of all youth out of school between 16 and 21 are Negroes, although they constitute only 15% of the population of that age group.

Long-range trends indicate a worsening of the situation. Loren Miller says: “The gap in white-Negro unemployment rates has increased since 1957 and unemployment spells tend to last longer among Negro workers than among whites. Nonwhite workers who represented 11% of the labor force and 22% of the unemployed accounted for 26% of the long-term unemployed—which means that many of them are permanently jobless.” [3]

Seventy-five percent of Negro workers are in unskilled, semi-skilled and service jobs, while the figure for white workers is 39%.

The average Negro born today has a life expectancy nearly ten years below that of the average white. In the South the gap is even greater.

One-sixth of all Negro homes today are designated by government surveys as “substandard,” as compared to 3% for whites.

In Southern agriculture, the absolute decline in Negro sharecropping has taken place against the background of the decline in farm employment generally, which is the most drastic change since the end of [end p. 204] World War II. There is a shrinkage of Negro farm ownership, which is proceeding at a rate twice as fast as that of whites. And, at the other end of the pole, there is a greater concentration of Negro farmers at the lowest rungs of agricultural ladder. There is a great acceleration of the concentration of agriculture into large farms and plantations, and the growth of absentee ownership. While, on the other hand, the mechanization hailed by the “liberal” gradualists as a cure-all for the South’s problems is not accessible to the poor farmer, and blocks access to the land by the masses of tenants and sharecroppers. At the same time, the displacement of basic soil tillers has been accelerated by the Federal Government’s crop reduction program, the sharp edge of which has been directed against the poor farmer. While the big planters are continuing to expand their production, the small, family-sized farms bear the main part, if not the full cost, of acreage cut backs. This, situation has operated to increase the traditional disadvantage of the Negro soil tiller in every respect.

These facts clearly show that the dominant economic trends in U. S. society are not towards imminent, direct integration of the Negro people into the existing social structure. On the contrary, the trends are towards strait-jacketing the Negro people into lower, frozen caste throughout the country which, in the words of one author, is “faced with more uncompromising segregation and larger slums.” [4]

The institutionalization of Negro oppression is documented by Michael Harrington in his angry study of poverty in the United States, *The Other America*. He reveals the structural basis for the continuation of Jim Crowism. Harrington points out that the Negro is an internal migrant who will face racism wherever he goes, who cannot leave oppression behind "as if it were a tsar or a potato famine. The present position of the Negro in the American economy has been institutionalized and unless something is done it will reproduce itself for years to come. The crisis is hitting precisely at those areas where gains in integrated work were made in the past two decades, in the semi-skilled jobs of mass production industries. And given the racial character of the American economy, this is a particularly severe blow to the Negro. It amounts to rebuilding the wall of prejudice, to destroying the advances which already have been made." [5]

The ever-growing economic problems of the basic masses of Negroes is a powerful source of discontent which is already bordering a strident disaffection and disillusionment with the American Dream. [end p. 205]

EROSION OF THE MYTH OF IMMINENT, PEACEFUL, DEMOCRATIC INTEGRATION

The struggle for Negro rights has reached an impasse. The myth of imminent, peaceful, democratic integration under the benevolent wing of the Federal Government is collapsing. The present struggle for freedom, far-from being an onward and upward march from victory to victory, is threatened with serious losses and setbacks.

Reformism, from the most conservative NAACP leaders and white liberals, to the so-called socialists, including the leaders of the Communist Party of the United States, made fundamentally false assumptions about the Negro question. They have all spread illusions which have contributed to the perpetuation of Negro oppression and at this point are disarming the Negro struggle in the face of the growing ultra-right danger. They have underestimated the ruthless determination of the Southern Oligarchy to maintain its traditional domination over Southern political life and its exaggerated prestige and influence in the Federal Government and in the Democratic party. They have operated on the naive assumption that the Southern Oligarchy would allow the Negro people in the South to gradually win enough rights to vote them out of office. They assumed that the Executive branch of the Federal Government would back up the Negro struggle in the South. They encouraged dependency upon the Federal Government.

Their basic mistake has been to underestimate the ruthlessness and power of the Southern Oligarchy, and to exaggerate the depth of the contradictions between the Federal Government and the Southern Oligarch states. It is true that the national administration of the post-war period have been pursuing a policy of making token concessions to the Negro people, mainly to improve the image of the United States abroad and to pacify the movement at home. But the Dixiecrats know very well, and base their entire strategy on the knowledge, that foreign policy considerations become minor when it comes to the question of internal order. They have political power and refuse to give it up piecemeal. And the Federal Government will ultimately concede to them as long as they hold, and use, the blackmail threat of creating civil disorder, and the Negro movement stays within

the framework of passive resistance.

The only way the Negro movement can free itself from the vise which is tightening around it is through independent, revolutionary struggle. This simple fact lies at the root of the crisis of Negro reformism. The Negro movement cannot advance further on the old basis, and in fact, it is faced with reversals and defeats. without a revolutionary reorientation. Given the [end p. 206] control of the state apparatus in the Deep South by the Oligarchy, which they will give up voluntarily, and the growing appeasement within the Federal Government, especially marked as an aftermath of the assassination of J.F. Kennedy, the *only* effective weapon Negroes have at this point is to pose their own threat to internal stability.

The clock cannot be turned back. The old methods have proven bankrupt. A new, revolutionary reorientation is the only alternative to despair, passivity, and escapism.

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FOOTNOTES

1. As quoted in *The National Guardian*, 6/6/63.
2. Loren Miller, "Prosperity Through Equality," *The Nation*, 9/1/1963.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Victor Perlo, "The Negro in Southern Agriculture."
5. Michael Harrington, *The Other America*, p.79.