

V. I. Lenin on the 'Black Question'

Author: Joe Pateman, Department of Politics, The University of Nottingham, Nottingham, United Kingdom

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Email: joepateman@yahoo.co.uk

Tel. no. 07545 386 897

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Abstract

In his revolutionary activities and writings from 1913 to the fourth Comintern Congress in 1922, V. I. Lenin didn't merely analyse the function of black labour in the process of capitalist development. He also had something to say about the role that black people themselves would play in their own emancipation. His posthumously published article *Russians and Negroes* is particularly insightful. The guiding motto of the Comintern under the direction of Lenin – 'Workers and oppressed peoples of all countries, unite!' fused the destinies of the racially subjugated black communities and working class in their struggles against imperialism. This article argues that Lenin showed a keen interest in what was then called the 'Black Question'. It shows that he adopted a non-reductive approach that highlighted the special character of black oppression in comparison to other forms. It concludes that his ideas remain relevant for the black liberation struggle today.

Key Words: *Lenin; black people; oppression; working class, emancipation*

Introduction

The scholarly literature on black history has paid little attention to the ideas of V. I. Lenin, the founder of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the leader of the world's first socialist state.¹ This oversight is understandable, since Lenin's writings on the subject comprise a small portion of his work. But it is also unfortunate, since in his activities and writings from 1913 to the fourth Comintern Congress in 1922, the Russian Marxist didn't merely analyse the function of black labour in the process of capitalist development. He also had something to say about the role that black people themselves would play in their own liberation. His posthumously published article *Russians and Negroes* is particularly insightful. The guiding motto of the Comintern under the direction of Lenin – 'Workers and oppressed peoples of all countries, unite!' fused the destinies of the racially subjugated black communities and working class in their struggles against imperialism. Lenin had quite a big impact upon the black movements around the world in the twentieth century. His ideas are worth studying for this reason alone, but it is not the only reason.

This article argues that Lenin's analysis of what was then known as the 'Black Question' is of threefold significance. To begin with, it illuminates the man himself;

¹ For a rare, yet brief discussion of Lenin's views on the American black struggle, in addition

by undermining the widespread perception that he was concerned solely with class politics. It is clear from both his writings and activities that Lenin cared much for the black movement, and this fact becomes all the more impressive once one recognises that there were no large black communities in his native Russia. Lenin showed a degree of interest on this question that few European socialists during the time could match.

Secondly, Lenin's analysis addresses a longstanding criticism of Marxism- one that has been vociferously advanced by black thinkers- which is that it reduces black racial issues to class (and predominantly white) issues, and that it thereby fails to appreciate the unique problems of the black experience. Efforts to understand the history of black peoples' oppression and resistance through the lens of a Marxist theoretical framework have often been rejected as inaccurate and incomplete. Marxist analyses supposedly presuppose European models of experience and history that devalue the significance of black people and their communities as forces of resistance and change.²

Although some Marxists may well have deployed a class reductionist analysis that undermined the credibility of their arguments, Lenin did not. He developed a non-reductionist approach that highlighted the *unique* and *special* character of black oppression in comparison to other forms. In doing so, he won a significant degree of prestige within the black community.

The third point of significance is that Lenin's ideas do not only have historical importance. They remain relevant for the black liberation struggle today, most notably because they highlight the importance of struggle and class unity. On the one hand, Lenin's analysis can remind the white working class that their own emancipation presupposes the emancipation of blacks. On the other hand, it can remind black workers that they need to align themselves with the working class if they are to achieve their own liberation.

The first section of this article analyses Lenin's writings on the oppression and struggles of black Americans. The second section examines his analysis of imperialism as it pertains to the exploitation of black labour in Africa. The conclusion highlights the significance of his ideas for comprehending and supporting the contemporary black struggle.

I. On the black struggle in America

Lenin's 1913 article *Russians and Negroes* is his earliest work on black people, though it was published for the first time a year after he died, in 1925. The piece is brief, at fewer than 400 words; and yet the argument is profound. The title is consciously provocative. 'What a strange comparison, the reader may think,' it begins. 'How can a race be compared with a nation?'.³ Lenin proceeds to prove how insightful the comparison is.

Showing that American slavery and Russian serfdom were abolished around the same time- the former in 1865 and the latter in 1861- Lenin argues that the revolutionary struggle has beneficial consequences, even when the bourgeoisie assumes the leading role, as it did in the United States in 1861. He supports this claim

² See C. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

³ V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works in 45 Volumes*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), Vol. 18, p. 18, 543.

by showing that in 1913 the ‘traces of slavery’ were fewer and less visible in the USA than within his Russian homeland. In order to illustrate his point, Lenin contrasts the 44 per cent illiteracy rate amongst black Americans aged nine and up, against the corresponding figure for Russians, which was 73 per cent. He explains that this difference was the product of qualitatively different forms of struggle. To be more precise, ‘the emancipation of the American slaves took place in a less “reformative” manner than that of the Russian slaves’.⁴ As he expressed it in a subsequent letter to US workers, ‘the people routed the American slaveowners, crushed that serpent and completely swept away slavery and the slave-owning state system and the political privileges of the slave-owners in America’. In doing so, they ‘set the world an example in waging a revolutionary war against feudal slavery’. Indeed, ‘for the sake of overthrowing Negro slavery, of overthrowing the rule of the slaveowners’, the northern forces understood that ‘it was worth letting the country go through long years of civil war, through the abysmal ruin, destruction and terror that accompany every war’.⁵ By contrast, it was state legislation imposed from above, by the ruling aristocracy, which abolished serfdom in Russia. ‘That is why today, half a century later, the Russians still show *many more* traces of slavery than the Negroes’.⁶ Like Marx’s own analysis, Lenin’s recognition of the significance of black resistance was rare during the time, since many bourgeois historians still believed that the slaves were characteristically passive, and that they did little or nothing to ameliorate their conditions.

Another lesson Lenin drew was that if a civil war was just and necessary to end slavery, then so too was the civil war being waged by the Russian masses to defend the socialist system.⁷

On the other hand, Lenin also argued that capitalism could guarantee neither complete emancipation nor social equality for the black Americans who led the struggle for their freedom. Although black literacy levels were better than their Russian counterparts, they were still far lower than the white population. ‘Such a scandalously high proportion of illiterates (as exists among the Black Americans) is a disgrace to a civilised, advanced country like the North American Republic’. As he wrote elsewhere, ‘one can easily imagine the complex of legal and social relationships that corresponds to this disgraceful fact from the sphere of popular literacy’. This statistic, in Lenin’s view, proved a more generalizable point, that ‘the position of the Negroes in America *in general* is one unworthy of a civilised country – capitalism *cannot* give either *complete* emancipation or even complete equality’.⁸ Lenin then reiterated Marx’s view that the African American population experienced a special oppression:

The Negroes were the last to be freed from slavery, and they still bear, more than anyone else, the cruel marks of slavery – even in advanced countries – for capitalism has no ‘room’ for other than legal emancipation, and even the latter it curtails in every possible way.⁹

⁴ Lenin, *Works*, Vol. 18, p. 543.

⁵ Lenin, *Works*, Vol. 19, p. 140; Vol. 28, p. 63.

⁶ Lenin, *Works*, Vol. 18, p. 543.

⁷ Lenin, *Works*, Vol. 19, p. 140.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 543-44; *Works*, Vol. 22, p. 25.

⁹ Lenin, *Works*, Vol. 18, p. 543.

In several subsequent works Lenin developed the theme of unique racial oppression; situating it within the historical context of structural economic development. In his *Statistics and Sociology*, for instance, he connected the intensification of black subjugation in America with the rise of imperialism:

They should be classed as an oppressed nation, for the equality won in the Civil War of 1861-65 and guaranteed by the Constitution of the republic was in many respects increasingly curtailed in the chief Negro areas (the South) in connection with the transition from the progressive, premonopoly capitalism of 1860-70 to the reactionary, monopoly capitalism (imperialism) of the new era.¹⁰

‘For the “emancipated” Negroes’, wrote Lenin in 1915, ‘the American South is a kind of prison where they are hemmed in, isolated and deprived of fresh air’. He again returned to the idea that there was ‘a startling similarity in the economic status of the Negroes in America and the peasants in the heart of agricultural Russia who “were formerly landowners’ serfs”’.¹¹ Then, in his *New Data on the Laws Governing the Development of Capitalism in Agriculture*, part of which was devoted to ‘Capitalism and agriculture in the United States’, Lenin corrected the writings of the leading Menshevik N. N. Himmer, who insisted that neither feudal nor quasi-feudal relations influenced the development of the US. Lenin pointed out that Mr Himmer was ‘forgetting’ slavery and racist oppression. By recognising these factors he could see that ‘in the former slave-owning South of the U.S.A.’ the survivals of feudalism were in fact ‘*still very powerful*’. Indeed, the post-emancipation agrarian property relations were, in his view, essentially the same for the American blacks and Russian peasants. In Russia, the nobility retained control over most of the land after serfdom was abolished. This forced the peasants to lease the land as tenants and give the nobles a percentage of their crop. The ‘freed’ peasants therefore remained in a subjugated, exploited state in spite of their emancipation. Lenin showed that the ‘free’ blacks in the deep south of America faced the same fate. Here, as in Russia, ‘the gentlemen who were the slave-owners of yesterday’ still owned the land and plantations, and so the blacks had to rent it off them. As such, the ‘economic basis’ of American agricultural capitalism was ‘the typically Russian, “purely Russian” *labour-service system*, which is known as *share-cropping*’. But whereas 75 per cent of blacks were tenants, only 39 per cent of whites were. Lenin therefore surmised that ‘the typical white farmer in America [was] an owner, the typical Negro farmer is a tenant’. But as he had already made clear, the blacks were ‘not even tenants in the European, civilised, modern-capitalist sense of the word. They [were] chiefly semi-feudal or—which is the same thing in economic terms—semi-slave *share-croppers*’ who continued ‘to work for the master and under his eye’. Lenin pointed out that ‘the sharecropping area, both in America and in Russia’, was ‘the most stagnant area’, where the workers were ‘subjected to the greatest degradation and oppression’. In contrast to Russia, however, he noted that ‘the proportion of share-croppers to the total number of farmers’ in America was ‘not decreasing, but...steadily and rapidly increasing’. That is, blacks faced increasing poverty, misery and decay, and this

¹⁰ Lenin, *Works*, Vol. 23, pp. 275-76.

¹¹ Lenin, *Works*, Vol. 22, p. 27.

implied a different kind of exploitation. Lenin again drew this comparison to show that the oppression of black people is unique.¹²

As an interesting side note, there is evidence to show that Lenin's studies on the US drew upon the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, though neither of them knew at the time. In 1914 Lenin sent a letter to I. A. Hourwich, stating that in the preparation of his work on US agriculture, he found a 'great deal of interesting matter' in a volume on agriculture containing the census of 1900.¹³ It just so happens that Du Bois worked for the Census Bureau during that year and carried out extensive research on the American south, particularly on black tenants, sharecroppers and farmers. It is likely that Lenin found this research 'interesting' because Du Bois carried it out.¹⁴

Lenin's analysis turned out to be quite insightful, for even in 1940 things had not improved much. Over half a million black farms were still founded upon the 'semi-feudal' system of sharecropping or tenancy.¹⁵ Seven years later, in a short article entitled *Lenin on Agriculture and the Negro Question*, the black Marxist scholar C. L. R. James highlighted the significance as well as the contemporary relevance of his 'brief but pregnant' study:

The point is that Lenin, in his unwearying task of educating the Russian proletariat, made analyses and observations of the Negroes in Southern agriculture which are of permanent value to us today, over thirty years afterward....in the US the tyranny still continues...the basic pattern is still the same today as when Lenin wrote...¹⁶

As it turned out, Mr Himmer's erroneous analysis was interpreted as the truth well into the twentieth century, with historians such as L. Hartz and D. Boorstein emphasising the supposedly non-feudal past of the US in their attempts to construct a peaceful and consensus filled history for the country.¹⁷

Lenin recognised that the black population of America continued to suffer not only special economic exploitation, but special *physical* oppression too. He raised attention to the situation in the American south, where their communities were being constantly terrorised, and where the government agencies either participated or stood back to watch. Lenin was angered by the fact that white middle class people within the socialist movement tended to be either oblivious or indifferent to this. One such person was the opportunist and 'renegade' K. Kautsky, the 'pope' of Second International Marxism no less. From his own position of white privilege, the bourgeois intellectual proclaimed that America was a shining example of 'pure democracy', one that protected minorities and provided equality for all under the law. Lenin was having none of it: 'The learned Mr. Kautsky could have studied this "law" of bourgeois democracy in connection with the...lynching of Negroes...in the democratic republic of America'.¹⁸ It was probably Lenin's unique attentiveness to this issue that encouraged Ho Chi Minh to re-examine it six years later. 'Among the collection of the crimes of American "civilisation"', wrote the Vietnamese communist,

¹² Ibid., p. 25, 29.

¹³ Lenin, *Works*, Vol. 36, pp. 271-72.

¹⁴ Mason and Smith, op. cit., 162-63.

¹⁵ R. Ivanov, *Blacks in United States History* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1985), p. 184.

¹⁶ C. L. R. James, *C. L. R. James on the Negro Question* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), p. 130-32.

¹⁷ Mason and Smith, op. cit., p. 163

¹⁸ Lenin, *Works*, Vol. 28, p. 245.

‘lynching has a place of honour’.¹⁹ Ho Chi Minh found this phenomenon to be so understudied that he devoted an entire article to it, which he entitled *Lynching, a Little Known Aspect of American Civilisation*. In this article, Ho Chi Minh gave a particularly harrowing depiction of the spectacle, one that was intended to enlighten ignorant communists. It is worth quoting at length:

Imagine a furious horde. Fists clenched, eyes bloodshot, mouths foaming, yells, insults, curses...the horde is transported with the wild delight of a crime to be committed without risk. They are armed with sticks, torches, revolvers, ropes, knives, vitriol, daggers, in a word with all that can be used to kill or wound. Imagine in this human sea a flotsam of black flesh pushed about, beaten, trampled underfoot, torn, slashed, insulted, tossed hither and thither, bloodstained, dead. The horde are the lynchers. The human rag is the Black, the victim. In a wave of hatred and bestiality, the lynchers drag the black to a wood or a public place. They tie him to a tree, pour kerosene over him, cover him with inflammable material. While waiting for the fire to be kindled, they smash his teeth, one by one. Then they gouge out his eyes. Little tufts of crinkly hair are torn from his head, carrying away with them bits of skin, baring a bloody skull. Little pieces of flesh come off his body, already contused from the blows. The black can no longer shout; his tongue has been swollen by a red hot iron. His whole body ripples, trembling, like a half-crushed snake. A slash with a knife: one of his ears falls to the ground...oh! How black he is! How awful! And the ladies tear at his face...‘light up’, shouts someone-‘just enough to cook him slowly,’ adds another. The black is roasted, browned, burnt. But he deserves to die twice instead of once. He is therefore hanged, or more exactly, what is left of his corpse is hanged. And all those who were not able to help with the cooking applaud now. Hurrah! When everybody has had enough, the corpse is brought down. The rope is cut into small pieces which will be sold for three or five dollars each. Souvenirs and lucky charms quarrelled over by ladies. ‘Popular justice’, as they say over there, has been done. Calmed down, the crowd congratulate the ‘organisers’, then stream away slowly and cheerfully, as if after a feast, making appointments with one another for the next time. While on the ground, stinking of fat and smoke, a black head, mutilated, roasted, deformed, grins horribly and seems to ask the setting sun, ‘is this civilisation?’²⁰

Basing himself upon a Leninist standpoint, Ho Chi Minh dismissed the idealist view that racism was the primary cause of lynching. Instead, he argued that ‘these crimes were all motivated by economic jealousy. Either the negroes in the place were more prosperous than the whites, or the black workers would not let themselves be exploited thoroughly’.²¹

Lenin also noted how, during the transition to imperialism, the ex slave owning planters allied with the ruling class to exclude black people from political participation. It is well known, of course, that the southern states barred blacks from the electoral system by imposing discriminatory voting qualifications that most of

¹⁹ Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works*, Vol. 1, (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1960), pp. 99, 105.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-01.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 102

them couldn't meet- such as the payment of poll tax, in addition to residence, educational and other qualifications. Many public places enforced black segregation, and the educational system introduced during Reconstruction was revised. In summarising up the blacks lack of civil, political and economic rights in the South, Lenin wrote that:

There is no need to elaborate on the degraded social status of the Negroes: the American bourgeoisie is in no way better in this respect than the bourgeoisie of any other country. Having "freed" the Negroes, it took good care, under "free", republican-democratic capitalism, to restore everything possible, and do everything possible and impossible for the most shameless and despicable oppression of the Negroes.²²

In his reflections upon these developments, Lenin lamented, in 1919, that 'half a century after the abolition of slavery in America the position of the Negroes was still very often one of semi-slavery'.²³ Indeed, this statement rings true today as well.

But Lenin did not only highlight the subjugation of African-Americans. He also championed their struggle for civil rights in the opening decades of the twentieth century. During the 1920s he paid special attention to the 'American workers and their *chauvinism*'.²⁴ In connection with this he attacked the US Socialist Party for being 'not quite unanimous' in its official attitude towards blacks. In practice, he argued that this stance manifested itself in complete indifference. The party had failed to understand the special nature of black oppression, and it was ignorant of the reality of racism. Lenin was astonished that in the places where the socialists did engage blacks, such as in Mississippi, they did so by organising them in separate groups. He noted, with amazement, that socialists accepted Jim-crow practices, and that their only positive measure was a resolution criticizing discrimination that was passed in 1901 and subsequently forgotten.²⁵

Lenin's influence upon American communists cannot be understated. Before 1921 the US Communist Party did not actively recruit blacks. As Robinson (who was no fan of Lenin) writes, its subsequent change in tact 'seems to be largely the responsibility of Lenin', who rebuked the organisation for its insufficient engagement with them. He insisted that blacks should play a leading role in the Party and the vanguard of the workers' movement, since they were one of the most oppressed groups in American society, and also because they would be the angriest elements in the country. In direct response to this demand, the Party began to recruit blacks, primarily through radical black intellectuals and nationalist organisers.²⁶ Lenin also led efforts to ensure that the second and fourth Comintern congresses placed the 'Black Question' on their agendas.

Since, according to Lenin, the black masses suffer a unique form of exploitation, he argues that they possess great revolutionary potential. The black struggle for civil rights, for actual equality, brings it into continual conflict with white North American and European capitalism, which, as Marx highlighted, depended from the very beginning upon the ultra-exploitation of black labour in its mission to maximise

²² Lenin, *Works*, Vol. 22, pp. 24-25.

²³ Lenin, *Works*, Vol. 29, p. 425

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 627.

²⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 590-91.

²⁶ Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 219, 220, 227.

profits and accumulate capital. In the same way that capitalism cannot give the working class the complete value of what they create, it also cannot grant ‘complete equality’ to black people. The upshot of this is that only the socialist revolution can accomplish the task of black emancipation. The struggle for black freedom must also be a struggle for working class freedom.

At the core of the Leninist approach to racism is its rejection of the notion that black people are merely helpless victims of repression, and its refusal to see them as objects for white paternalism. Lenin proved this in practice when he brought up the ‘Black Question’ at the Comintern Second Congress. During this event the delegates agreed that black revolutionaries should participate in the activities of the organisation, and that US communists should arrange an African American national congress, which would provide a preliminary to the establishment of an international black congress. The National and Colonial Commission also discussed the Black Question and presented four theses on it:

1. The Fourth Congress considers it essential to support every form of the Black movement that either undermines or weakens capitalism or places barriers in the path of its further expansion.
2. The Communist International will struggle for the equality of the white and Black races, and for equal wages and equal political and social rights.
3. The Communist International will utilise all the means available to it to compel the trade unions to take Black workers into their rights, or, where this right already exists in form, to make special efforts to recruit Blacks into the trade unions. If this proves to be impossible, the Communist International will organise Blacks in their own trade unions and make special use of the united front tactic in order to force the general unions to admit them.
4. The Communist International will take immediate steps to convene a general conference or congress of Blacks in Moscow.²⁷

The Congress adopted a report on the Black Question that anticipated the emergence and growth of a black racial consciousness across the world. It emphasised the aim of achieving the racial unity of the working class as a preliminary condition for the socialist revolution.

A few months earlier the Foreign Affairs Commissar G. V. Chicherin proposed in a letter to Lenin that the international programme of the Soviet government ‘must be that the Negro and other colonial peoples participate on an equal footing with the European people in conferences and commissions and have the right to prevent interference in their internal affairs’. Lenin was highly supportive. In his annotation of Chicherin’s letter, he wrote ‘True!’ in the margin and underscored the passage ‘on an equal footing’ four times.²⁸

The distinction that Lenin makes in his 1913 article between the USA, where the African American community ‘still bear, more than anyone else, the cruel marks of slavery’, and Russia, where there are ‘visible traces of slavery’, is of crucial importance. He suggests that the experiences of the black slaves in America gave rise to a qualitatively different form of exploitation, one that left ‘cruel marks’ that the Civil War could not remove. And yet in spite of all this, Record has argued that

²⁷ J. Riddell, *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), p. 951.

²⁸ Lenin, *Works*, Vol. 45, p. 509.

‘Lenin undertook no special analysis of the Negro question in the United States’.²⁹ The ignorance of this claim is phenomenal.

Because Lenin approached this issue sensitively, and because he understood the strategic relation of the working class struggle to the black struggle for liberation, many militant black activists in the US were attracted to his ideas. In his study of Lenin’s influence in America, Mason has written that as soon as African Americans learnt of him, Lenin made an immediate impact upon the movement for black liberation. In 1918, for instance, the leading black socialists within US Socialist Party urged the organisation to draw upon Lenin’s ideas and struggle for black freedom in order to build socialism in America. When Lenin died 1924, the Universal Negro Improvement Association- the largest mass movement of African Americans in the early 1920s- sent a cable that expressed the ‘deep sorrow and condolences of the four hundred million negroes of the world over the death of Nikolay Lenin’ and which also stated that ‘to us Lenin was one of the world’s greatest benefactors’.³⁰ Marcus Garvey, the chief organiser of the association, delivered a lengthy speech entitled ‘the Passing of Russia’s Great Man’, in which he described Lenin as being ‘probably greatest man in the world between 1917 and the hour of 1924 when he breathed his last’.³¹ And there are also the stirring recollections of several black poets, writers, and novelists, who were inspired by Lenin’s devotion to the black struggle. Take, for instance, the following ballad of Claude McKay, who observed the Fourth Congress of the Communist International:

And often now my verves throb with the thrill
When, in that gilded place, I felt and saw
The simple voice and presence of Lenin.³²

Langston Hughes, another fighter for black rights, also praised Lenin:

I am Chico, the Negro,
Cutting cane in the sun,
I lived for you, Comrade Lenin,
Now my work is done.³³

And there is also Edwin Brooks, who wrote a piece entitled ‘Why I love Lenin’:

Do you know, friend, why I love Lenin, my father, father of oppressed peoples? Because he led the way to the promised land. Because he died for the downtrodden. Because he, like, like other communists I have known, are like fine pieced of silver, jewels of the people, tellers of the truth. If he were here-alive- in my basement, he would talk to me- not in scorn, not in condescension, not in harsh commands, not in hate or deception- but in

²⁹ W. Record, ‘The development of the communist position on the Negro Question in the United States’, *The Phylon Quarterly* 19:3 (1958), p. 316

³⁰ Mason and Smith, op. cit., pp. 9-10, 169-71.

³¹ Cited in T. Martin (ed.) *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Dover: The Majority Press, 1976), p. 252.

³² C. McKay, *A Long Way From Home*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), p. 125.

³³ Cited in Mason and Smith, op. cit., p. 172.

comradely love. He would observe my weaknesses, he would strengthen me. Whatever happens, at any place or time, Lenin is deep within me.³⁴

Lenin's claim that capitalism can give black people only 'limited emancipation' instead of 'complete emancipation or even complete equality' remains true seventy-five years after he wrote his analysis of *Negroes and Russians*. 'The cruel marks' of slavery manifest themselves today in the daily lives of black people. They prove the purely formal character of the equality and freedom provided under capitalism. In addition to discrimination and racism at the institutional level, blacks also face poorer political representation, healthcare, education, housing, living standards, employment and wages.

But Lenin does not only argue that racism threatens black people. He argues that it also threatens white workers and the working class more generally. After referencing the 44 per cent literacy rate amongst African Americans he mentioned that:

It is instructive that among the whites in America the proportion of illiterates is not more than 6 per cent. But if we divide America into what were formerly slaveholding areas... and non-slave-holding areas... we shall find 11 to 12 per cent illiterates among the whites in the former and 4 to 6 per cent in the latter areas! The proportion of illiterates among the whites is twice as high in the former slaveholding areas. It is not only the Negroes that show traces of slavery!³⁵

Lenin's general point here is that black oppression also weakens the white working class, and that white and black workers therefore need to unite if they are to free themselves. Indeed, the persistence of a poorly educated underclass of widely despised 'white trash' in the rural United States is a testament to the contemporary relevance of his analysis. The debilitating effects of 'the cruel marks of slavery' upon workers of all shades show that the struggle to eradicate racism should be a core concern for all working peoples.

II. On imperialism

Aside from closely analysing the unique aspects of the Black Question in America, Lenin also looked at how the rise of imperialism ramped up the exploitation of blacks in Africa. On this issue he showed a degree of concern and interest that few other European socialists did.

In his classical study, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Lenin provided a well-researched analysis of how the development of capitalism compelled the European bourgeoisie to open up new markets for accumulation abroad, and black Africa in particular. Lenin notes, for instance, that between 1865 and 1898 the national income of Britain doubled, whilst its income from abroad increased by 900 per cent in the same period. He points out that the exploitation of Africa's people and resources accounted for most of this increase.³⁶ In his *Notebooks on Imperialism*, for instance, Lenin wrote that Europe was a 'rentier' that 'rides on the negroes'.³⁷ And in his study on *Imperialism and the Split in Socialism* he wrote that:

³⁴ Ibid., 174.

³⁵ Lenin, *Works*, Vol. 18, p. 544.

³⁶ Lenin, *Works*, Vol. 22, p. 281.

³⁷ Lenin, *Works*, Vol. 39, p. 452.

there is the tendency of the bourgeoisie and the opportunists to convert a handful of very rich and privileged nations into “eternal” parasites on the body of the rest of mankind, to “rest on the laurels” of the exploitation of Negroes...keeping them in subjection with the aid of the excellent weapons of extermination provided by modern militarism.

Lenin makes it clear that this ‘tendency is not accidental; it is “substantiated” economically’ by the capitalist system.³⁸ Indeed, his discovery of the causal connection between imperialism and African exploitation was not only accurate during the First World War. In his book on *Neo-Colonialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, the Ghanaian Marxist-Leninist Kwame Nkrumah extended the arguments of *Imperialism* to the twentieth century after the Second World War.³⁹ Lenin’s thesis remains correct today as well. By drawing upon his arguments, the adherents of dependency theory such as Walter Rodney have proven that resources flow from a periphery of poor underdeveloped dark-skinned countries to a core of wealthy white states, enriching the latter at the expense of the former.⁴⁰ It is undeniable that western capitalist nations are still ‘eternal parasites’ on the sub-Saharan African continent. Europe is still the ‘rentier’ that ‘rides on the negroes’.

Ho Chi Minh elaborated upon and developed Lenin’s analysis during the Russian leader’s lifetime by highlighting the brutal consequences of modern imperialism and colonialism for the blacks of Africa. As he put it in one of his earliest works, ‘ever since colonialism existed the whites have been paid to bash in the faces of the blacks’.⁴¹ Indeed:

If lynching- inflicted upon the negroes by the american rabble- is an inhuman practice, I do not know what to call the collective murders committed in the name of civilisation by Europeans on African peoples. Since the day the whites landed on its shores, the black continent has constantly been drenched in blood.⁴²

In several articles Ho Chi Minh documented the atrocities committed by the European colonial settlers in various parts of Africa.⁴³ He emphasised that the conditions of the African peasants were at their worst in West and French Equatorial Africa, where the European corporations had taken complete control and proceeded to exploit the local populations. In a statement that could describe the situation today, he argued that:

These colonies are in the hands of about 40 companies. They occupy everything: land and fields, natural resources and even the natives’ lives; the latter lack even the right to work for themselves. They are compelled to work for the colonies, all the time, only for the companies. To force them to work for nothing, incredible means of coercion are used by the companies. All lands and fields are confiscated. Only those who agree to do the farming required by the companies are allowed to have some tiny plots of land. People are affected

³⁸ Lenin, *Works*, Vol. 23, p. 116.

³⁹ K. Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism, The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1965).

⁴⁰ W. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Verso, 2018).

⁴¹ Ho Chi Minh, op. cit., p. 32.

⁴² Ibid., p. 113.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 19, 119-17, 152-54.

with all kinds of diseases although malnutrition, and the death rate, especially among the children is very high.⁴⁴

Never one to mince his words, Ho Chi Minh argued that ‘these mass murders were set forward as political principles. It was a policy of extermination’. Indeed, ‘the inevitable consequence of this monstrous system is the extinction of the black races’.⁴⁵ For these reasons, he agreed with Lenin that black people have suffered a unique form of exploitation that cannot be simply subsumed under the general Marxist category of the class struggle. ‘The black race is the most oppressed and most exploited of the human family’.⁴⁶

Things have not changed much since Ho Chi Minh wrote these hard-hitting words. The black working class of Africa continues to be oppressed and exploited by western capitalist corporations (in addition to its own black bourgeoisie). Although there may no longer be an explicit ‘policy of racial extermination’, the murderous effects of capitalist exploitation have produced the same result.

But at the same time as early twentieth century imperialism intensified the subjugation blacks, Lenin recognised that it also created the conditions for their immanent *political* emancipation. In his *Imperialism* he referenced Schulze-Gaevernitz’s work on the subject, a man who he elsewhere rightly described as an ‘imperialist’.⁴⁷ Whilst, according to the German economist, ‘the “merit” of imperialism is that it “trains the Negro to habits of industry”’:

...the “danger” of imperialism lies in that “Europe will shift the burden of physical toil—first agricultural and mining, then the rougher work in industry—on to the coloured races, and itself be content with the role of rentier, and in this way, perhaps, pave the way for the economic, and later, the political emancipation of the coloured races”.⁴⁸

In contrast to the European bourgeoisie, who thought that imperialism would usher in a new stage of global political and economic domination over the black races, Lenin saw it as an opportunity for the African middle classes to lead the struggle for national liberation. Whilst Lenin recognised that this would not free the working class blacks economically, he rightly argued that it would at least give them some political independence, lessen their racial oppression, and increase the ranks of the anti-capitalist struggle. It was for both of these reasons that he supported the African national liberation movements. Lenin was the first person to clearly and consistently highlight the organic connection between the struggle against colonial oppression with the struggle for socialism. Indeed, one of the main reasons why he led the way in calling for the establishment of the Third International in 1919 was that the Second International had neglected and betrayed the struggles of black people around the world. It was Lenin who insisted- against opposition from both the right and the left- that whilst the primary antagonism of the epoch was between socialism and imperialism, it was also necessary to recognise the significance of the struggles in the dependent and colonial countries, including the bourgeois-democratic struggles. It

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 153.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 118-19.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 99.

⁴⁷ Lenin, *Works*, vol. 39, p. 452.

⁴⁸ Lenin, *Works*, Vol. 22, p. 281.

was this position that underlined Lenin's emphasis upon the special nature of black oppression in the US, its national, race and class components, and the necessity of the broadest possible movement to ending that oppression.

In his summary of Lenin's contribution to the African anti-colonial struggle, Ho Chi Minh wrote that he 'was the first man to determinedly denounce prejudices against colonial peoples, which have been deeply implanted in the minds of many European and American workers. Lenin was', moreover, 'the first to realise and assess the full importance of drawing the colonial peoples into the revolutionary movement'. That is, 'he was the first to realise that without the participation of the colonial peoples, the socialist revolution could not come about'.⁴⁹

Conclusion

This article has argued that Lenin's analysis of the 'Black Question' has a threefold significance. Firstly, it shows that he was deeply interested in the vicissitudes of the black struggle, far more so than many other European socialists. The notion that Lenin was concerned solely with class politics has no basis in his writings or his activities. This myth needs to be laid to rest.

Secondly, Lenin's analysis repudiates the longstanding criticism, often advanced by black activists, that Marxism reduces racial problems to class problems, and that it thereby fails to comprehend black history. Although some Marxists may have adopted this reductionist perspective, Lenin did not. He endorsed a non-reductionist approach to understanding the historical experience of black peoples and their resistance against oppression. He expressed the Leninist standpoint that that it is erroneous to ignore the uniqueness of the black struggle when emphasising the primacy of the class struggle. He recognises that black people have suffered a unique form of racial exploitation that the white working class has never experienced. This in turn earned him a great deal of respect amongst twentieth century black activists.

Thirdly, Lenin's analysis is significant because it remains relevant today as well. To begin with, he shows, in his comparison of Negroes and Russians, that the *form* of struggle greatly influences the gains of the black liberation movement. Because Russian serfdom was abolished from above, by the autocracy, the serfs made only limited strides towards their emancipation. But because African American slavery was abolished through a revolutionary armed struggle from below, one in which the slaves themselves took part, the black movement achieved far more. And this was in spite of the fact that the white bourgeoisie led the way. The main takeaway here is that the contemporary black movement will achieve the most success if it wages its struggle in a *revolutionary* way, rather than purely reformist one. Although it should of course make full use of the peaceful, constitutional methods provided by liberal democracy, it should not rely solely upon these methods. Instead, the black struggle should combine peaceful strategies and tactics with more radical ones. At the same time as it organises educational meetings and lobbies for more rights in parliament, it should also march on the streets and hold demonstrations. It should, in short, do whatever is necessary to overcome its oppression. Black people should not let bourgeois legality hold them back. For this legality is, after all, designed to keep them in a subjugated state. The black movement in America has of course understood this fact for a long time. All of its major achievements have been won only through a desperate struggle, one that has more often than not been forced to assume an extra-

⁴⁹ Ho Chi Minh, op. cit., p. 140.

parliamentary form. Another of Lenin's points was that if the contemporary socialist movements deployed similar tactics, then they could achieve far better results as well.

Perhaps more importantly, Lenin's analysis also shows that the working class is a *universal* class that can emancipate itself only when it liberates society from *all* forms of exploitation and oppression. This means that the working class has to be characterised by *unity*. It cannot prioritise some interests and identities to the detriment of others. To do so will be to doom itself to permanent subjugation. Lenin's emphasis upon the maintenance of working class unity can be used to criticise the twin extremes of 'workerism', on the one hand, and 'black identity politics' on the other. Both of these trends have weakened the modern liberation movements.

Workerism is, in essence, the tendency to champion working class characteristics over all others. This is by no means a bad thing. But it can, in the places where there are dominant ethnic groups, prioritise the characteristics of these groups, whilst ignoring those of the minority groups. As this analysis has shown, Lenin opposed the workerism of the 1920s American communist and socialist movement on the basis that it ignored the oppression of the black workers, and that it thereby contributed to the atomisation and weakening of the proletarian movement as a whole. Unfortunately, this exclusive 'white' workerism remains rampant in the western communist movement today as well. Critics can convince themselves of this by looking at the racial composition of the Communist Parties. They tend to be overwhelmingly white. This constitutes a serious problem. For if, as Lenin shows, these parties are to ever have any hope of building a mass movement that can emancipate the working class, then they need to focus more of their efforts on bringing black workers into the fold. After all, he points out that the black workers are some of the most oppressed within their class, and this means that they will be especially receptive to communist ideas. But Lenin also shows that if Communist Parties are to be successful in drawing in these workers, then they need to study black history more closely, recognise the specificity of the black struggle, and connect it with the proletarian struggle for socialism and communism. They can do this by engaging more positively with the black activist movements, by targeting more of their campaigns in black areas, and by recruiting more black people into leading positions. Lenin's writings and activities provide an exemplary example to follow in this regard.

But at the same time as the western communist movement has become more workerist, there has also been a tendency for the black movement to discard its class objectives. Over the past few decades the advocates of 'intersectionality' have argued that capitalism produces oppression and privilege in a variety of forms, and that identity politics is the best and most radical mechanism to resist this. 'Identity politics' is a political approach and analysis based on people prioritising the concerns most relevant to their particular cultural, social, sexual, ethnic, religious, racial, or other identity. The advocates of this approach typically form exclusive political alliances with others within their particular group, and as a result, they tend to promote their group's interests without regard for the interests of the larger social groups that they are also members of.

The rise of intersectionality and identity politics has resulted in a general retreat from class and working class unity. This retreat has become particularly prominent within sections of the black community. One of the most prominent manifestations of this is the 'Black Lives Matter' (BLM) movement in the US, which campaigns against violence and systemic racism towards black people. In common with all of the other groups based on identity politics, the proponents of this campaign believe that a

movement focused upon black identity is the best and most radical mechanism to oppose their racial subjugation. Indeed, it has achieved a great deal of success in this regard, and for this reason it *cannot and should not be dismissed*.

Conversely, however, it is important to recognise that this mode of agitation for social justice has the enthusiastic support of American capital. Black identity politics would not have permeated American culture so deeply if the ruling class believed that it was a threat to their interests. In fact, with global news brands frequently speaking in the university driven language of intersectionality, identity politics has been pushed to the forefront of mainstream political culture by the very groups it is designed to oppose.

As Darren McGarvey rightly argues, it is no bad thing that multinational corporations are using their influence to promote social justice.

But it begs the question: what's in it for them? Intersectionality in its current form, rather than an irritant to privilege, atomises society into competing political factions and undermines what really frightens powerful people: a well organised, educated and unified working class.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, identity politics has become firmly established and, in spite of its shortcomings, it can be hugely beneficial, especially for those who face barriers to political participation. Identity politics can help black people to take their first important political steps towards freedom, and this means that a movement like BLM should not be simply disregarded as a form of 'petty bourgeois' politics. At the same time, however, movements like this should never be seen as the solution to the 'Black Question'. Black workers *cannot* end systemic racism under capitalism. For as Malcolm X once pointed out, 'you can't have capitalism without racism'.⁵¹ Black workers can free themselves only when they destroy this system and build socialism, and Lenin shows that this requires the development of a broad and united working class movement. Black identity, like class, provides just one perspective of the world. It cannot explain everything and black activists should be dissuaded from thinking that it does. Socialist organisations must work harder to not only widen the discussion and welcome a diversity of opinion, but to also reconcile black identity with class politics so that they work together, rather than against one another. Lenin shows that they must both have an equal status going forward otherwise they will become exclusionary. His writings and activities indicate how this unity can be achieved.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

⁵⁰ D. McGarvey, *Poverty Safari: Understanding the Anger of Britain's Underclass* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2017), pp. 159-60.

⁵¹ Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), p. 69.