

The 'Negro Question' – A Socialist Solution or Unrequited Love Affair?

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We recently celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. I helped mark that anniversary by revisiting the impact and relations of the Russian Revolution on/with the Black diaspora in a week-long curation called [Black October](#) for the online Black Perspectives platform. The essays for that week reminded readers that the Soviet socialist project had an immense impact on Black liberation projects across many contexts from Ethiopia to Scottsboro, Alabama. The political expediency of socialist internationalism for Soviet expansion and power has made most of us disdainful of the Soviet project as well as cynical about state socialism. Yet, I remain interested if not also curious about the extraordinary fact that Black liberation was a central subject of political concern for the largely 'white' east European socialist. I am still drawn to the idea that 'white' east European socialists could come to understand (on some level) that their future was bound up with the futures of Black and colonized peoples. Perhaps their arrogance or the power of their structural argument allowed them to see beyond (even if still impaired by) their own racisms in order to link the humanity of Black and colonized people to their own. There are a lot of nuances and caveats here, but I want for a moment to recognize that the "Negro Question" and the socialist answer was at times perhaps more radical and indeed meaningful than many attempts at "diversity" and "multiculturalism" – two answers to the assumed question of racism in capitalist democracy.¹

To hold that space of curiosity, not only for what was but for what could have been, I paste here two images: one of Claude McKay during his 1922 visit in Moscow for the meeting of the Communist International and the other of Claudia Jones. Both figures loomed large in U.S. Black socialist politics (and aesthetics for McKay) and both were part of the Black diaspora (McKay was born in Jamaica and lived in the U.S. while Jones was born in Trinidad, lived in the U.S. and was exiled to the UK).

¹ The "Negro Question" is not a single, well defined, determinate issue or question (as Richard Bernstein refers also to the "Jewish Question"). The "Negro Question" circulated as a discourse, was given life and meaning in varied locations, languages. It pulled Bolsheviks into the problem of global coloniality when key figures recognized that European and U.S. capitalist colonialism and imperialism produced racial categories in the service of labor and resource exploitation. In particular, the "Negro Question" became an internal discourse to the politics of the Communist International due to the force of Black radical voices (as with Claude McKay's "Report on the Negro Question"). I engage the concept of the "Negro Question" as a way to frame/engage the question of "whose society?"



Claude McKay 1889-1948

Claudia Jones 1915-1964

I am thinking about the lives of McKay and Jones now, as I read Stuart Hall's essay "The meaning of new times." (Hall, too, was Jamaican-born). In the Hall piece there is a confidence in **socialist solutions** to the times in which he is situated. What does he mean by "the times?" Mainly, he is thinking historically to delineate how his current moment came to be (i.e., Thatcherism). He wants the reader to understand that there is much that is not new to the times (this is made clear in his "Racism & Reaction" piece as well). Hall explains that when we name the current crisis as *new* we are letting ourselves off the hook, maybe we are being lazy too. We need to inquire about what has always been there (what has been repressed) and how it has changed, not just look for new tendencies. I take this intervention to be rooted in a commitment to socialist solutions, which includes a class-based structural schematic for diagnosing the times. The underlying confidence that Hall has in socialist solutions is not deterministic or utopic, but allows for a kind of **optimism**. That optimism is not about outcomes but about approaches. Specifically, I am struck by the key moment in the essay when he states, "Once we have opened up this gap, analytically, between Thatcherism and new times, it may become possible to resume or re-stage the broken dialogue between socialism and modernity" (258). The broken dialogue is a reference to an earlier point in which he recounts how Marx understood socialism as redeeming modernity, or that it could "heal the wounds of modernity through a fuller and deeper modernity" (255).

One of the primary wounds of modernity is anti-Blackness and racism. Can socialist solutions heal that wound? Hall remains committed, it seems to me, to the possibility. It is ironic that his essay is published in 1988, just before the collapse of the Berlin wall and the massive disavowal of state socialism. Now looking from the perspective of 2019, it is evident that for many of the former state socialist regimes in the Eastern Bloc and Soviet Union, the move towards liberalism was indeed a steady move to the right. Regardless, like Hall, I want to hold onto or be curious about socialist solutions – namely, in the kind of diagnosing and dreaming that interlinks rather than "integrates" Black humanity with "white." The difference between interlink and integrate is the difference between Claude McKay speaking at the Communist International on the Negro Question and institutional "diversity training" in its corporate and academic settings. It is the difference between wanting to transform the whole system

realizing that in order to do so we need to see how exploitation manifests laterally, and wanting to improve the system by bringing people in who were left out.

The investment that McKay and Jones put in socialist solutions to Black exploitation are not the same of course to each other or to Hall. McKay would largely leave organized socialism having experienced the paternalism, opportunism, and racism of U.S. and European socialists.² Jones was a fierce journalist and insightful critic of Black female exploitation and whose commitment to the Communist Party would ultimately lead to her deportation to the United Kingdom in 1955. However, I invoke McKay and Jones here in order to amplify an implicit question I hear in Hall's essay – can socialism heal the wounds of modernity, and specifically the wounds of anti-Blackness? Is the formulation of questions, such as the “Negro Question” relevant, impactful? McKay and Jones are asking a similar question insofar as their lives struggled with how socialist politics could be used in service of Black liberation. While McKay, Jones and Hall are quite distinct, I am linking them here with the subtle optimism I read in Hall's work. Can actually existing socialist politics reproach and repair the wounds of modernity?

Hall may be optimistic, but he also exposes blind spots. The space that is needed between Thatcherism and new times, is the perspective that is missing. This missing or repressed comes up in the Fred Moten reading. In particular, I am interested in his concept of **temporal distress** (248). Moten uses the concept to describe the relationship between the printed text from Stokely Carmichael's speech and the score from Manuel de Falla's opera *La Vida Breve* in Charles Gaines' artwork *Librettos*. He writes, “This blurring of score and speech and the breathing that takes place in the space between the objects' layers instantiates new musical composition in choreographic performance, a kind of improvisation manifest in movement-activated visual and aural attention that occurs under what might be called temporal distress” (248). He states further that he is interested in “what can't be finished or cleared up, the unpayable debt, the unaccountable ...” (248).

I understand the idea of temporal distress as a way to describe how the past (i.e., the road of modernity and ongoing anti-Blackness) cannot be resolved in the way that Hall (and perhaps other Marxist theorists) have in mind. Temporal distress is the tension between the past, the present and how we got to the present. The distress between times (or places) cannot be resolved but it can be related to. If that is the case, then perhaps optimism is not what is needed but a different cache of emotional and political investments. At the same time, I wonder whether this relating (and distress) primarily speaks to the struggle of being a person of color and rather than broadly to the question of whether modernity can be fixed or healed. Is the problem or phenomenon of temporal distress something that can be addressed by socialist solutions? We haven't yet gotten a world that has responded to and re-arranged

² His novel *Amiable with White Teeth*, recently recovered and published, is a testament to this.

because of the "Negro Question." Can asking this (kind of) question do that work? What is the work of relating for the white America invoked in Carmichael's speech, the one that still has not condemned "herself for the acts of brutality and bestiality that she's heaped upon us as a race – black people" (249). Is an optimism in socialist solutions ultimately an unrequited love affair?