

Is the Black Bourgeoisie the Leader of the Black Liberation Movement?

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While the growth of Black Nationalism, the drive of the basic masses for self-realization and identity is objectively revolutionary and anti-imperialist, this by no means implies that all its forms and manifestations are revolutionary. The question is not so simple. [**end p. 70**]

Black Nationalism, as that of all oppressed peoples, is of a contradictory nature. There are tendencies within it which forward the struggle for liberation, and there are tendencies which objectively detract from the struggle, which warp and hinder it. This distinction arises from the dual nature of the nationalism of an oppressed people, based upon class conflicts within the national revolutionary movement. For this reason, revolutionaries cannot indiscriminately support all features and manifestations of nationalism, but must *emphasize the demands and aspirations of the basic masses*. Our criterion must be to what extent specific forms, expressions or tendencies bring the masses into conflict with the dominant white power structure. From this point of view, there are reformist and revolutionary tendencies in both the integrationist movement and the nationalist-oriented movements.

It is our opinion that the “Great Debate” raging in the Black community over Integration vs. Separation gives only a superficial and distorted picture of the true issues and problems involved. *It reflects mainly the power struggle between two sections of black bourgeoisie.*

The direct integrationist or assimilationist group fights for ideological leadership of the masses, mainly in order to advance its own narrow group of well educated and “acceptable” Negroes, although their integrationist program is entirely unrealistic for the vast majority while the ghetto nationalist sector, economically based on the northern urban Black community, indulges in fantasies of building up a separate Black “Free Enterprise” economy as the solution. Neither section of the Black bourgeoisie is capable of leading the type of struggle necessary to win Black freedom. The basic masses must therefore forge their own instrument and fight for a program of liberation that will not subordinate their interests to those of either sector of the black bourgeoisie.

The main overriding task confronting the Black people is the mobilization of their entire resources to take full advantage of the present crisis within the ranks of the enemy.

Harold Cruse in his article, “Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American,” [1] which has exerted considerable influence in left circles, involves himself in the toils of the ghetto nationalists, elaborates a theory for them, and then calls upon white

progressives to fall in behind this “revolutionary” leadership. Instead of fighting [end p. 71] for a revolutionary program based upon the needs of the working people he seems to be distracted by the din and clamor of the Integration versus Separation debate and disparages the self-defend: movement in the Deep South. He sees only two trends: the integrationist trend as represented by the assimilationist sector of the Black bourgeoisie, and the separatist trend represented by its nationalist sector. He then proceeds to narrow down the issue to the clash between them. The masses, he contends, have no choice but to follow one or the other sector of this bourgeoisie:

“. . . the Negro working class must either follow the bourgeoisie when it leads on civil rights or swing to the (bourgeois) Nationalist wing. It has no other perspective except racial apathy or stalemate.” [2]

Cruse thus neatly writes off the possibility for the basic masses to fight independently and forge their own revolutionary movement. Evidently dazzled by the “militant” talk of the nationalist leaders, he latches onto the ghetto nationalist current, seeing in it the wave of the future. Equating the narrow class aims of this stratum to those of the masses, he imputes a revolutionary potential to its petty strivings for a larger share in the ghetto market in the northern urban centers.

He professes to see in this conflict a “challenge” to white ruling class domination of the Negro urban communities, “which are owned lock, stock and barrel by white absentee proprietors” and are “the crucial areas in which the economic exploitation of the Negro is focused.”

“It is in this area,” he contends, “that the *most crucial American class struggle lies.*” “It is only the nationalist wing which vocally objects to this exploitation.”

Cruse berates the Communist Party for its failure to see the class divisions among the Black people, for pursuing the “myth of a uniform Negro people,” and attempting to beguile us “into believing that any Negro was simply one of the ‘Negro people’ whether a cotton-picker, a show girl, a steel-worker, a political appointee of the party in power, or the editor and publisher of *Ebony* magazine.” [3]

This blurring over class lines in the Black community, he contends, has led the Communist Party into “adopting a position essentially no different from that supported by the NAACP. “Ironically, Cruse, while seeking to disassociate himself from the old Left, falls into the same type of mistake which, if pursued, would lead to the same bankruptcy [end p. 72] and blind alley in which the CPUSA now finds itself. Cruse differentiates between the assimilationist and nationalist sectors of the Black bourgeoisie, but at this point his class analysis falls down. He fails to mention the objective conflict of interest and aspirations between the basic, most exploited and oppressed Black masses, north and south, and the aspirations of the ghetto nationalist sector of the Black bourgeoisie. While the CPUSA glosses over clear lines in the Black community and ends up tailing the bourgeois assimilationists, Cruse glosses over the objective conflict of interest among the class components of Black nationalist movements and ends up trailing the ghetto

nationalists. While the CPUSA rejects all nationalism as an “obstacle in the path to Negro freedom,” [4] Cruse apparently considers all Black Nationalism, even its most escapist, utopian manifestations, as revolutionary, and is prepared to follow their leadership. Clearly, both positions subordinate the interests of the basic masses to one or the other sectors of the Black bourgeoisie. Both tend to hinder the development of a revolutionary Black nationalist trend which is already beginning to manifest itself in practice in the movement for self-defense in the Deep South, and among Black workers and radical intelligentsia throughout the country.

The key to Cruse's thinking on the question of liberation of oppressed peoples is his assumption that nationalist movements are primarily a bourgeois effort, in which the struggle of the bourgeoisie for control of the national market is the pivotal revolutionary factor. Hence, his reliance on the bourgeoisie as the natural leader of those. This over-[end p. 73] simplified formula runs throughout his article and is a complete variance with contemporary theory, practice, and experience in national liberation movements. It is an outdated concept. And it is particularly unrealistic when it is applied to the Negro question and the attempt is made to impute to the conflict over the ghetto market the importance of a major contradiction between the nationalist bourgeoisie and U.S. imperialism. The petty strivings of this weak, non-industrial, marginal bourgeoisie, largely removed from the Deep South areas of Black population concentration, and operating in the major cities of the North is presented as a “challenge” to white ruling dominance, and as the “real economics of the American race question.” He attempts to identify the ghetto petty-bourgeois stratum with the colonial bourgeoisie whose fight is for a national market. *He fails to understand that even in the advanced semi-colonial countries today, the market factor is no loner the major element in the national revolutionary movement.* He fails to take into account the change in the social essence of the national question since the onset of the general crisis of the imperialist system following World War I.

“... the essence of the national question lies at present in the struggle of the masses of the people in the colonies and of the dependent nationalities against financial exploitation against financial enslavement, and the cultural effacement of these colonies and these nationalities by the imperialist bourgeoisie of the ruling nationality. What significance can the competitive struggle between the bourgeoisies of the various nationalities have when the national question is presented in this manner? Certainly, not a decisive significance, and in certain cases not even important significance. It is perfectly obvious that we are concerned mainly, not with the fact that the bourgeoisie of one nationality is beating or can best the bourgeoisie of another nationality in the competitive struggle, but with the fact that the imperialist group of the ruling nationality exploits and oppresses the main masses, and above all, the peasant masses of the colonial and dependent nationalities, and exploiting them, it thereby draws them into struggle against imperialism.” [5] [end p. 74]

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FOOTNOTES

1. Harold W. Cruse, "Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American," *Studies on the Left* 2/3 (1962): 12-25.
2. Cruse, "Reply" [to Clark Foreman], *Studies on the Left* 3/1 (1962): 70.
3. Cruse, "Reply" [to Richard Greenleaf], *Studies on the Left* 3/1 (1962): 62.
4. Claude Lightfoot, *Political Affairs* (July 1962).
5. J. Stalin, *Leninism* I, 245-46