

Socialism and Black Oppression

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Though not unblemished, socialists in the United States have a record in confronting black oppression that is unmatched by other political traditions.



An interracial dance organized by the Young Communist League in Baltimore, MD on November 15, 1929. Washington Area Spark / Flickr

W. E. B. Du Bois, writing in 1913, famously called the race question “the great test of the American socialist.” Later generations of socialists tended to agree with him, elevating the antiracist struggle to a place of centrality in left strategy. From the 1930s to the present day, American leftists have seen the struggle against racial oppression, most centrally of black Americans, as one of the [key questions](#) radicals face in the movement to remake American society.

At the same time, it is something of a consensus judgment on the Left that before the 1930s, when the Communist Party (CP) [threw itself](#) into organizing the struggle against black oppression, American radicals largely failed Du Bois’s test. The record of the pre-Depression left is often summed up with

Socialist Party (SP) leader Eugene Debs's statement: "We [the Socialist Party] have nothing special to offer the Negro." The SP, which was the largest organization of the American left until the growth of the CP in the 1930s, and the Left more broadly, [are judged guilty](#) of class reductionism and general neglect of the problems of black Americans.

The truth is considerably more interesting. Take Debs, for example. In the [same essay](#) from which his infamous statement is drawn, he also declares, "The whole world is under obligation to the Negro, and that the white heel is still upon the black neck is simply proof that the world is not yet civilized." When an SP member wrote back to Debs, warning him, "you will jeopardize the best interests of the Socialist Party if you insist on political equality of the Negro," Debs replied with scorn that the party would "be false to its historic mission, violate the fundamental principles of Socialism, deny its philosophy and repudiate its own teachings" if it failed to stand strong for black equality. These were hardly the words of a man who thought his movement should simply ignore black oppression.

In one sense, Debs was an outlier in early twentieth-century radicalism. Few other white socialists matched his deeply felt commitment to the emancipation of all oppressed groups, and fewer still took the kind of steps he did to bring it about, from fighting his union on the question of racial integration to [refusing to speak](#) in front of segregated audiences.

At the same time, Debs's attention to what was then called "the Negro question" was hardly exceptional in this period of American radicalism. From the turn of the century to the advent of the Great Depression, there was a wide-ranging and extensive debate among American radicals on what the fact of black oppression meant for socialists. The answers to this question varied tremendously, from black socialists who argued for emigration to build socialism in Africa to some white socialists who wholeheartedly embraced white supremacy. Whatever might be said about this debate, the one thing early American socialism cannot be accused of is ignoring the race question.

Marx and Race

The caricature of early American socialism as disinterested in race stems in large part from a more basic accusation that Marxism has never paid much attention to issues of racial oppression. Examples of this charge are legion. Cedric Robinson, in his influential work [Black Marxism](#), contends that "Marx consigned race, gender, culture, and history to the dustbin. Fully aware of the constant place women and children held in the workforce, Marx still deemed them so unimportant as a proportion of wage labor that he tossed them, with

slave labor and peasants, into the imagined abyss signified by precapitalist, noncapitalist, and primitive accumulation.” Following a similar path, historian of slavery Walter Johnson [argues](#), “If [Adam] Smith displaced the question of slavery, it might be said that Marx simply evaded it.”

These kinds of arguments cannot survive an even cursory confrontation with Marx’s writings. From his days as a radical journalist in Germany to his time studying political economy as an exile in England, Marx showed a significant interest in the politics and economics of slavery in the United States. When the [Civil War broke out](#), Marx [followed its progress intently](#), holding that its conclusion would determine the future course of working-class politics. And unlike so many commentators on the war, Marx understood from the beginning that it was about slavery, and that it must, at some point, force the issue of emancipation to the forefront of American politics.

In January 1860, even before Lincoln’s election, he [wrote](#) in a letter to Engels, “In my view, the most momentous thing happening in the world today is the slave movement — on the one hand, in America, started by the death of Brown, and in Russia, on the other. . . . I have just seen in the Tribune that there’s been another slave revolt in Missouri which was put down, needless to say. But the signal has now been given.” When Lincoln finally began to take steps toward abolition, issuing the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation warning that any states still in rebellion by January 1, 1863 would be subject to immediate emancipation, Marx was ebullient. He [declared](#) the proclamation “the most important document in American history since the establishment of the Union, tantamount to the tearing up of the old American Constitution.”

Marx’s most famous commentary on the Civil War came through the [letter](#) of the [International Workingmen’s Association](#) (IWMA) congratulating Lincoln on his reelection in 1864. Marx had founded the IWMA with collaborators in an effort to coordinate the struggle for workers’ power across countries. The letter begins by measuring the political distance traveled between Lincoln’s first and second administrations. “If resistance to the Slave Power was the reserved watchword of your first election,” it proclaims, “the triumphant war cry of your reelection is Death to Slavery.” Marx then places the Civil War in a global context, arguing that the outcome of the war would decide the future of class struggle everywhere. The slaveholders, in taking up arms for their cause, had “sound[ed] the tocsin for a general holy crusade of property against labor.” As such, Marx argued that the workers of Europe were firmly on the side of the Union, feeling “instinctively that the star-spangled banner [the union flag] carried the destiny of their class.” Indeed, Marx himself [had helped organize](#) this sentiment a few months earlier, when British workers had demonstrated to

prevent their country's ruling class from intervening on behalf of the Confederacy.

“When Lincoln finally began to take steps toward abolition, Marx was ebullient.”



A recruiting poster for the United States Colored Troops. Wikimedia Commons For Marx, slavery and its abolition were clearly phenomena of massive importance. Some of Marx's critics will concede this. After all, slavery is mentioned in the *Communist Manifesto* as a form of class society. This, they argue, is the rub. Marx, and hence Marxists, can only see slavery as a class structure — as materialists, they necessarily miss or underplay its racial element. Leaving aside how the reverse mistake — seeing American slavery as primarily a racial structure, and missing its [class dynamics](#) — bedevils so much discussion of the issue, even this accusation is plainly false for Marx and for early American socialists as well. Marx [saw](#) the racial ideology birthed by slavery as one important factor in shaping the development of working-class politics in the United States. His discussion in his letter to Lincoln of racism and class consciousness is worth quoting in full:

While the workingmen, the true political power of the North, allowed slavery to defile their own republic, while before the Negro, mastered and sold without his

concurrence, they boasted it the highest prerogative of the white-skinned laborer to sell himself and choose his own master, they were unable to attain the true freedom of labor or to support their European brethren in their struggle for emancipation, but this barrier to progress has been swept off by the red sea of civil war.

One might argue that Marx was too sanguine about the prospects for interracial working-class alliances after abolition, and there is no doubt some truth to the charge. But Marx's error flows from his evaluation of the Civil War's revolutionary nature. It is precisely because Marx thought abolition such a momentous event that he overestimated the possibilities for class struggle in its wake. Regardless of this revolutionary optimism, Marx was clearly sensitive to racism's effects as an ideology.

Unfortunately, for all the effort Marx expended in understanding slavery and racism's importance in the United States, his writings on this score did little to shape the early generations of American Marxists. Until the 1930s, American Marxists made little reference to Marx's writings on the Civil War. In other words, Marx pioneered an analysis that understood racial oppression as interlinked with the development of capitalism, containing weighty implications for working-class struggle. And then his followers, unaware of his labors, pioneered another such analysis decades later. Twice, in a half-century, Marxists effectively invented new analyses of racial oppression in the United States.

Black Socialist Forebears

Prior to the founding of the Socialist Party of America in 1901, there were two black socialists who left their mark in the historical record: Peter H. Clark and George Washington Woodbey.

Peter Clark was, so far as is known, the first black socialist in the United States. He joined the Workers Party of the United States (WPUS), the American affiliate of the International Workingmen's Association, in 1876, shortly after its founding. Prior to this, Clark had been a conductor on the Underground Railroad, had written for Frederick Douglass's newspaper, and was the founder of a teachers' union for black teachers in Cincinnati, where he lived.

The skills he had honed during abolitionist agitation and Republican campaigning were put to use spreading the good news of socialism. During the [Great Railroad Strike of 1877](#), Clark spoke in Cincinnati on behalf of the WPUS to a crowd of thousands, denouncing the state repression the strikers faced:

The sight of soldiery fired the hot blood of the wronged men [the strikers], and

they met force with force. Whether they are put down or not, we are thankful that the American citizens, as represented by these men was not slave enough to surrender without resistance his right to appeal for redress of grievances. . . . These men will be avenged — nobly avenged. Capital has been challenged to the contest; and in the arena of debate, to which in a few days the question will be remanded, the American people will sit as judges, and just as surely as we stand here, their decision will be against monopolists and in favor of the workingmen.

Clark's speech won him praise from socialists and castigation from the city's newspapers, who painted him as a dangerous anarchist. Later that year, he ran as a WPUS candidate for state school commissioner, becoming the first black socialist in American history to run for political office. While unsuccessful, he did win around eight thousand votes, mostly from black and German neighborhoods in the city.

Yet for all Clark's importance as the first black American socialist, he did surprisingly little to advance the cause of racial equality within socialist ranks. The [Socialist Labor Party](#), the successor to the WPUS, formally supported black equality. Yet the organization, comprised primarily of German immigrants, never lent the issue any importance whatsoever. Within the party, Clark rarely, if ever, mentioned the racial oppression black workers faced, or talked about the problems a racially divided working class posed for socialist strategy. As a result, as the Socialist Party was being formed around the turn of the century, a gap had grown between Marx's close attention to the problems of race, slavery, and freedom, and the actual thought and practice of American Marxism.

“Give the Negro along with others the full product of his labor by wrenching the industries out of the hands of the capitalist and putting them into the hands of the workers.”



George Washington Woodbey, undated. Wikimedia Commons

The second major black American socialist, George Washington Woodbey,

would begin the work of mending this gap. Born into slavery in 1854, Woodbey moved in 1902 to San Diego and joined the newly formed Socialist Party. Woodbey rapidly became a party favorite in Southern California. Such was his popularity with his comrades that when a hotel in Los Angeles refused to give him a room on account of his color, the LA Socialist Party [issued a leaflet](#) warning fellow workers to stay away: “We demand as trade unionists and socialists, that every wage-worker in Los Angeles bear well in mind these two places that depend on public patronage — the Northern Restaurant and Southern Hotel — keep away from them. They draw the color line.” Woodbey distinguished himself for the attention he devoted to race and socialism. Like many of the early socialist race radicals, Woodbey saw the struggle for socialism as an extension of the struggle against slavery. Where the Civil War had destroyed chattel slavery, socialism [would finish the work of emancipation by destroying wage slavery](#). He directly compared the institutions of contemporary capitalism with those of slavery, arguing: “In the days of chattel slavery the masters had a patrol force to keep the negroes in their place and protect the interests of the masters. Today the capitalists [use the police](#) for the same purpose.”

Woodbey also wrote socialist tracts specifically addressing the race question. He made a few different arguments on this front. First, he argued that black Americans should vote Socialist because “nearly all [black Americans] are wage workers,” and as such, would benefit disproportionately from socialism. Second, he argued that since the Socialist Party needed workers’ votes, it was opposed to any and all methods of disenfranchising workers, including those directed against blacks in the South. Third, he argued that socialism was not an anti-religious ideology. This last point he pressed repeatedly in a number of tracts. Woodbey understood that it would be impossible for socialism to gain a hearing among early twentieth-century black Americans if socialists forced them to choose between socialism and their religion.

Perhaps most interestingly, Woodbey noted the development of [class differentiation](#) in black America and warned against relying on upper-class African Americans for the salvation of the race. Woodbey confronted such arguments head on, arguing that while many believed “the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few Negroes will solve this problem . . . a few white men have all the wealth and the rest of their brothers are getting poorer every day.” For Woodbey, the race problem had one solution — “[g]ive the Negro along with others the full product of his labor by wrenching the industries out of the hands of the capitalist and putting them into the hands of the workers.” Woodbey didn’t limit his thinking on race to “the Negro question.” He was also,

unlike most of his West Coast comrades, a dedicated foe of the racist anti-immigrant politics that existed throughout the labor movement during those years. While party leaders rushed to support the attacks on immigrants and calls for restrictions that issued from the American Federation of Labor, Woodbey stood firmly against the scapegoating. Though Woodbey was ultimately unsuccessful in persuading the party to stand by the principles of internationalism, he joined the small group of party members — including Eugene Debs — who refused to overlook the racism in the labor movement.

The Socialist Party

Debate over how to deal with the “color line” broke out in the earliest days of the Socialist Party, at its 1901 founding convention. The Resolutions Committee [offered a resolution](#) to the assembled delegates declaring the socialist movement in favor of “equal rights for all human beings without distinction of color, race or sex.” The measure proceeded to identify black Americans in particular as the victims of oppression and exploitation, and called for their organization into the socialist movement and the trade unions.

The move met immediate opposition from a number of white delegates, who argued that no special appeal to black workers was necessary. Of the three black delegates at the convention, two, John H. Adams and Edward D. McKay, agreed. However, the third, William Costley, disagreed strongly, pointing out that “the Negro as a part of the great working class occupies a distinct and peculiar position in contradiction to other laboring elements in the United States.”

In response to delegates’ attacks on the original resolution, Costley introduced an even more strident one, this time including language denouncing the “lynching, burning and disenfranchisement” that black Americans were subject to. This resolution provoked a new storm of opposition but also attracted new allies. Ultimately, the language on lynching and disenfranchisement was eliminated by committee, but the resolution itself passed.

The Socialist Party thus came into being declaring itself in sympathy with oppressed blacks, inviting them to join its struggle, and blaming capitalists for black oppression and white racism. In the United States of 1901, this was indeed something special. Far from settling the issue of the new party’s stance on the race question, however, the resolution at the founding convention only opened up a debate that would run from its founding through to the split of 1919 that signaled the end of the SP’s hegemony on the American left.

The first to respond to the resolution were the elements of the party who opposed it, many of whom gave voice to the vilest sorts of turn-of-the-century

racism. [Victor Berger](#), leader of the party's right wing and party boss in Milwaukee, propounded on the "scientific" basis for black inferiority in a party paper, declaring, "There can be no doubt that the negroes and mulattoes constitute a lower race . . . [M]any cases of rape . . . occur whenever negroes are settled in large numbers . . . [F]ree contact with the whites has led to the further degeneration of the negroes, as of all other inferior races." In the *International Socialist Review*, William Noyes offered a similar lesson in race science, informing his readers that "the negroes are as a race repulsive to us. . . . The odor, even of the cleanest of them, differs perceptively [sic] from ours." "The resolution at the Socialist Party's founding convention opened up a debate that would run from its founding through to the split of 1919."



Victor Berger, Bertha Hale White, and Eugene V. Debs in 1924. Library of Congress

These opinions did not go unopposed in the party. Debs, the leading light of the young party, announced his views as in the same spirit as the original resolution. He wasn't alone. One of the most remarkable — and least noticed — early comrades of his was the Philadelphia writer Caroline Hollingsworth Pemberton. The niece of a Confederate general, Pemberton had written articles on the race question, as well as a novel about a black Tuskegee graduate who tries to organize a Southern black community only to fall victim to vigilante

violence.

In late 1901, she published a series of articles in the *Worker*, a New York socialist paper. Pemberton began with a history of slavery, reminding her readers that slavery hadn't been the solution to a race problem, but rather a labor one, as black slaves and workers had been "the basis of every form of industrial enterprise south of the Mason and Dixon's line." Especially unusual for a white socialist at the time, Pemberton also discussed the history of black resistance to slavery, declaring "every fugitive slave was a whole insurrection in itself." Moving forward to the early twentieth century, Pemberton argued that the real "Negro problem" was "the labor problem plus the inherited prejudices of employer and fellow workmen in the North, plus the bitter jealousy in the South of a proud people who were conquered by the sword while defending their beloved dogma that 'the negro is not a man.'" More forthrightly than any other socialist in the early years of the party, Pemberton argued that the race question was actually a question of racism.

The practical upshot of these debates soon became clear, as state parties in the South began drawing up their constitutions. In Louisiana, the party adopted a "Negro clause," which opposed disenfranchisement, declaring that "the State has no right to disbar any citizen from the franchise," while endorsing segregation, including in the SP itself, arguing for "separation of the black and white races into separate communities, each race to have charge of its own affairs."

The Louisiana party's explicit endorsement of segregation opened a new round of debate in the party. A number of Southern socialists disapproved of the "Negro clause" not because it accommodated the party to racism, but because it put the party on record as having done so. Other Southern socialists wrote in to various publications declaring their full-throated support for the clause.

Throughout the country, most socialist papers reacted largely with embarrassment. Unwilling to stand forthrightly for full equality, they mainly wished the issue would simply go away. A few months after the publication of the Louisiana state party's constitution, they got their wish. The National Committee persuaded the Louisiana party to withdraw the clause, and when the party went on to establish segregated branches, it encountered no further controversy from the rest of the SP.

In the rest of the South, the party's position varied. In Texas, the party was, if anything, even more brazenly racist. Tom Hickey, editor of the Texas socialist weekly the *Rebel*, used the opportunity of news about a black socialist running for office in Los Angeles to launch a tirade against social equality, denouncing capitalism for creating workplaces where one could see "negro and white men

alternating with the scrapers and drinking out of the same cups. . . . Capitalism has driven the workers into a social equality that would not be possible in Socialism.”

Elsewhere the situation was somewhat better. The 1912 platform of the Tennessee party declared that “the question of white supremacy” was injected into white workers’ minds by the “capitalist class to keep the workers divided on the economic field.” In 1909, Virginia socialists adopted a resolution directing the party “as a whole to pay more attention to the solidarity of the white and colored workers,” and “to break down the race prejudice existing in their own state by particularly inviting colored workers into the organization.” The most exceptional group of Southern socialists was in [Oklahoma](#). There, the state party waged a determined battle against black disenfranchisement, winning substantial black support in the process. The roots of this unusual commitment lay partially in the historical peculiarities of Oklahoma, where black voters retained full legal rights until 1910. Unlike most of the South, black voters were a potential constituency for the SP during the first decade or so of its existence. Equally important, however, was the presence of [Oscar Ameringer](#) in the Oklahoma party. Originally from Germany by way of Wisconsin, Ameringer moved south to work as a union organizer in New Orleans. Later, he credited his experience there with convincing him of black equality. When he moved to Oklahoma, he began editing the state party’s leading organ, the *Oklahoma Pioneer*.

“The most exceptional group of Southern socialists was in Oklahoma.”



Oklahoma socialist Oscar Ameringer in 1920. Library of Congress

In 1910, the Oklahoma legislature moved to disenfranchise the state's black population with a literacy test and a grandfather clause, which would then be voted on in a statewide referendum. The state party immediately moved into action against it. Party leaders formed a committee to campaign against the referendum, and launched a lawsuit to prevent it from reaching the ballot. In their propaganda, the Oklahoma socialists issued a warning that black socialists would pick up time and again in the coming years: "If the white section of the working class abandons the negro he will become a scab and strike breaker on the industrial fields and in times of unrest the armed and uniformed mercenary of the ruling class."

The party ultimately failed to stop the referendum, which was won with the sort of violence and fraud that was typical of Southern elections in those years. Yet it did garner the attention and respect of a number of black voters and writers in the state. A convention of black voters met to declare their disappointment with the Republicans, issuing a resolution that concluded "Therefore, Be It Resolved, That we hereby endorse the platform put out by our Socialist brothers and

recommend that all the colored people of Oklahoma vote the Socialist ticket and align themselves with our Socialistic brethren.” Throughout the state, socialist papers proudly carried news of the resolution. As the *Pioneer* put it, “We welcome this action on the part of the negroes, not because it will increase our voting strength in the fall election, but because the negro is part of the working class and we stand for the whole of it.”

As Oklahoma socialists were waging their struggle for black voting rights, socialists elsewhere in the country were growing dissatisfied with the party’s vacillating stance on black rights. The immediate impetus for this dissatisfaction was the [Springfield race riot of 1908](#), which saw over two thousand black citizens forced from the city and several killed. The socialist journalist William English Walling went to Springfield to investigate for a Chicago socialist newspaper and was horrified by what he saw. His report on the race riot, “The Race War in the North,” caught the attention of Mary White Ovington, a socialist and former settlement-house worker, who wrote to Walling in hopes of founding a new organization of African Americans and whites dedicated to black equality. The fruits of their efforts were revealed in early 1909, when a call for a “Lincoln Emancipation Conference to Discuss Means for Securing Political and Civil Equality for the Negro” was circulated, signed by the white socialists, as well as prominent black leaders, including Ida B. Wells-Barnett, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Mary Church Terrell. The socialists promoted the meeting in the socialist press, and the resulting conference, in June 1909, [led to the formation](#) of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons.

Inside the party, both Walling and Ovington were intensely critical of the failure to steadfastly support black equality. They were increasingly joined in this criticism in the years before World War I. In 1910, the pioneering black socialist [Hubert Harrison](#) wrote a series of articles in the *New York Call* challenging the party to make a choice between “Southernism or Socialism.” Around the same time, the New York economist I. M. Rubinow was publishing a very long series of articles in the *International Socialist Review*, covering black history in the United States and arguing that the party needed to organize black workers if it was to have any hope of succeeding.

Throughout the country, evidence slowly mounted that the party was taking the task of organizing black workers more seriously. A chapter of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society was chartered at Howard University. In West Virginia, the party press called to black workers: “As Socialists, and as a party organization, you are welcome to become one of us and we exclude none on account of color, race or previous conditions.” In the Socialist press, discussions

of the race question began to take on a different character. The *Call*, for example, proclaimed: “The whole Negro race is suppressed, robbed, outraged, insulted, debauched, ground down in a manner that makes the blood of those not blinded by race passion to boil. And this is a regular thing, not in isolated cases of passion.” Slowly, but perceptibly, the party was beginning to take the task of opposing racism more seriously.

“The whole Negro race is suppressed, robbed, outraged, insulted, debauched, ground down in a manner that makes the blood of those not blinded by race passion to boil.”

World War I cut this process short. Wartime repression [crippled the party](#); the Oklahoma party, so distinguished by its commitment to black equality, dissolved itself to avoid repression. Across the country, socialist papers were kept from the mails, and socialists were subjected to vigilante violence. In this atmosphere, the race question [slipped from the party’s attention](#).

Yet contrary to the judgment of generations of critics, the party did not ignore the race question. Early American socialists got further than that. Where they failed was in agreeing among themselves on the nature of the question — or a solution to it. The Communist Party would soon surpass the Socialists in this regard, and on many others as well, on the question of the color line.

The Communist Party

There was no indication when the Communist Party was formed that only a decade later it would be playing a leading role in the struggle for black liberation in the United States, or in anything else, for that matter. Born out of the groups expelled by the SP leadership in mid 1919, the Communist Party actually began life as two separate groups, both claiming to be the proper representatives of American Bolshevism. Only through the intervention of the [Communist International](#) were these groups gradually cajoled into unity. Historians looking back on the CP’s first decade have, not without reason, judged it harshly, seeing a group totally incapable of confronting the realities of American society in the 1920s. This judgment has extended to the party’s treatment of the race question. Not until the “[Black Belt Thesis](#)” came down from the Comintern in 1928, the story goes, did the party really pay attention to the problems of black liberation in the United States. (The Black Belt was a series of counties in the Deep South named for its rich black soil and for its predominant black population.) Like the standard judgment on the Socialist Party’s record on race, this narrative obscures easily as much as it reveals. From quite early on, American Communists had an orientation toward black struggle and an understanding that the color line in organized labor had to be smashed in

order for the working class to advance.

At the beginning of September 1919, two separate Communist Parties [were created](#): the first group formed the Communist Labor Party (CLP), while the second formed the Communist Party of America (CPA). Neither of the two formations succeeded in expanding its influence among [black Americans](#). In May 1920, a substantial section of the CPA broke off to join the CLP, which had been agitating for unification since the split. The new group was called the United Communist Party (UCP), and it soon began to address the race question with more seriousness.

The most important step the UCP took was to begin a relationship with [Cyril V. Briggs](#), editor and publisher of the *Crusader*. Briggs was a Caribbean-born black nationalist who sympathized with socialism and the Russian Revolution. By early 1921, the UCP was aware of and beginning to promote the *Crusader*. In the middle of that year, after the last rump of the CPA had been persuaded, under Comintern pressure, to join the UCP, Briggs was convinced to join the Communist Party. He brought with him his publication, as well as the radical secret society he had founded, the [African Blood Brotherhood](#) (ABB). From the ABB would come many of the early Communist Party's most important black cadre members, including the brothers (and later rivals) Otto Hall and Harry Haywood, as well as the powerful orator Richard B. Moore. More than any other single initiative in the CP's first decade, the recruitment of Briggs and his ABB comrades [provided the party](#) with a foundation for winning over black radicals to communism.

The newly united Communist Party's halting efforts to orient more seriously to the race question were much enhanced by the intervention of the Communist International in 1922. At the Comintern Congress of that year, the body established a Negro Commission and subsequently passed "Theses on the Negro Question." These theses, while less famous than the [Black Belt Thesis of 1928](#), were arguably more important in steering the party toward a greater focus on antiracist struggle.

The theses began by connecting the black struggle in the United States with anticolonial struggles worldwide. They argued that colonialism had provoked a wave of rebellion across the colonized world and that the black movement in the United States should be seen in that context. Referencing the history of black revolt against slavery and oppression, the document declared it the duty of Communists to link up the struggle for black liberation with the struggle against capitalism. Doing so, it declared, was a "vital question of the world revolution." The Comintern's incisiveness on the race question at the Fourth Congress was in no small part thanks to the interventions of black Communists. Otto

Huiswoud was a delegate and addressed the convention with a speech on the difficulties posed by antiracist organizing in the United States. Even more significant than Huiswoud, however, was the Jamaican-born poet [Claude McKay](#), who was part of black radical circles around 1918 and 1919. McKay wrote “[If We Must Die](#),” the anthem that arguably launched the [New Negro movement](#), and helped edit the Greenwich Village radical journal the *Liberator*. “The Comintern’s incisiveness on the race question at the Fourth Congress was in no small part thanks to the interventions of black Communists.”



Claude McKay speaking at the Kremlin in 1923. Wikimedia Commons
Part of the reason Huiswoud and McKay’s interventions were so successful was that their arguments about the party’s need to decisively combat white racism were deeply congruent with arguments Lenin had made about the right of nations to self-determination almost a decade earlier. In 1914, as part of a [larger debate](#) with other [Second International](#) leaders about nationalism, Lenin [had argued](#) that there was a decisive difference between the nationalism of oppressor nations, such as Russia, and the nationalism of oppressed nations, like Poland. The nationalism of the oppressors, he argued, was everywhere and always a brake on the development of class-consciousness, while the nationalism of the oppressed, insofar as it was part of a struggle against their oppression, merited support.

Though the analogies with the race question were clear, it took Huiswoud and McKay to make plain that the Leninist position on national self-determination could easily be extended to the color line. The party adapted to this new perspective only slowly. Evidence suggests that the leading faction in the party, that behind Charles Ruthenberg, were not enthused with the Comintern's line. A few months after the "Theses on the Negro Question" were passed, the American representative on the Comintern's executive body reported that the party was having difficulty implementing the theses, and that the party's leadership disagreed with them. Ruthenberg himself wrote to the Comintern claiming that the theses were not helpful in the United States. More disturbingly, Ruthenberg appears to have had a deep hostility to the ABB, accusing the group of fomenting scabbing with its encouragement of black workers to leave the South. At one point, the CP's central committee even passed a resolution declaring that future work on the race question would go through neither Briggs nor Huiswoud.

But while the party leadership was digging in its heels, events were developing that would render such obstinacy irrelevant. Around the same time as the Fourth Congress, Robert Minor had been put in charge of the CP's Negro Committee. As historian Mark Solomon [has noted](#), though it says a great deal that the party still didn't see the need for black leadership on this front, Minor was surely the most qualified white person in the party for the job. Born in Texas, Minor rebelled against the racism of Southern life and became an anarchist. Working in New York as a cartoonist for the socialist press around 1917, he became friends with Lovett Fort-Whiteman, a fellow Texan and black radical who would become one of the early CP's most important black organizers. Minor developed an interest in the race question and, by 1924, had read classic pieces by Frederick Douglass, as well as work from more contemporary writers, including W. E. B. Du Bois and [James Weldon Johnson](#).

That year, Minor [wrote](#) a series of articles in the *Liberator* that were more advanced than anything that had previously come from the pen of a white socialist or communist in the United States. The first article was a two-part essay entitled "The Black Ten Millions," which ran in the February and March issues of the *Liberator*. The article began with a history of slave revolts, going through not only well-known episodes such as those led by Nat Turner, Gabriel, or Denmark Vesey, but more obscure ones as well, including Mark Caesar's revolt in Maryland and the German Coast Uprising in Louisiana. From the beginning, Minor made clear that the history of black Americans was not only a history of oppression, but of resistance as well.

From there, Minor went through the history of black struggle from

Emancipation to the 1920s. Commenting on the meteoric rise of Marcus Garvey's [Universal Negro Improvement Association](#) (UNIA), Minor argued that even though Garvey could be called a "monarchist" and a "Bolshevik-baiter," his organization was revolutionary. To make this argument, Minor drew on Lenin's distinction between the nationalism of oppressor nations versus the nationalism of oppressed nations, and applied it to race consciousness: "Race consciousness in a dominant race takes the form of race arrogance, and we are accustomed to despise it as reactionary (which it is). But race consciousness in a people who have just emerged from slavery and are still spurned as an inferior race may be — and in this case is — revolutionary." By building the UNIA, even on the basis of a fantastical and unworkable program, Garvey had "in five years destroyed the tradition that the American Negro masses cannot be organized." The article ended by reprinting key passages from the "Theses on the Negro Question" and arguing that Communists were ready to stand as allies to the black struggle for liberation.

During these years, the party also began launching its own efforts to organize black struggle. Most of these attempts centered on Chicago, where the party headquarters was located. There, in 1924, the party dove into a strike by black women garment workers. The party set up a storefront office in the neighborhood, and as party activists won over more supporters, employers began to come to the table. That same year, the party established the Negro Tenants Protective League in Chicago, in an attempt to organize rent strikes against exploitative landlords. Though these efforts were small and localized, they [heralded a new approach](#) to the race question, one that prioritized direct participation in the struggle against racism.

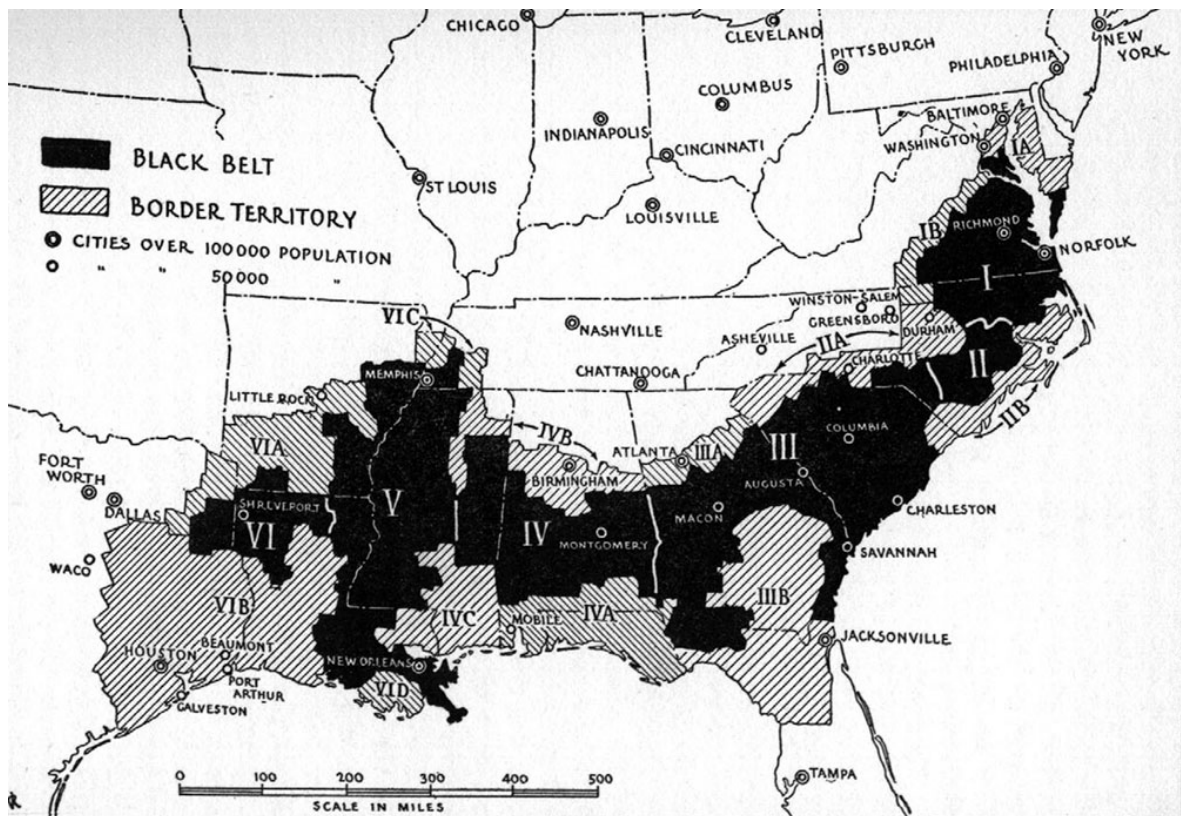


Lovett Fort-Whiteman at the founding of the ANLC, 1925. Wikimedia Commons

In 1925, the party took its biggest step yet in confronting the color line, organizing a new body — the American Negro Labor Congress — to advance black working-class radicalism. The organization was largely the vision of one man: [Lovett Fort-Whiteman](#). After joining the CP shortly after its founding, Fort-Whiteman had spent time in Russia as a student at the Comintern’s University of Toilers of the East, a school for revolutionists from oppressed countries. When he returned to the United States, Fort-Whiteman was ready to put what he had learned into action. He was, however, disappointed with the half-hearted attempts the party had made so far at building a base among black workers. In late 1924, he complained to the Comintern that the American party had not made “any serious or worthwhile efforts to carry communist teaching to the great masses of American black workers.” He proposed the ANLC to remedy this failure, and the Comintern enthusiastically agreed. The ANLC was launched in mid 1925. The black press greeted the new organization enthusiastically, impressed by the vigor with which the

communists supported black equality. W. E. B. Du Bois himself looked upon the Congress with optimism. Despite this auspicious start, the ANLC never managed to become what Fort-Whiteman envisaged. Organizing black workers into a radical labor organization in the mid 1920s was, quite simply, a Herculean task. A well-organized group would have found the effort daunting, and the CP of the mid-1920s was hardly well organized. Though the ANLC managed to intermittently publish a newspaper, the *Negro Champion*, and hold forums in places like New York and Chicago, it never became a mass organization. In 1927, the CP's central committee, fed up with the ANLC's lack of success (and encouraged by leading black Communists), removed Fort-Whiteman from leadership of the group, replacing him with former ABB member Richard B. Moore.

Around the same time that Moore came in to head the ANLC, big changes were afoot in what was coming down from the Comintern. In Russia, [Harry Haywood](#), a student at the Lenin School, and Charles Nasanov, a Russian Communist who had spent time in the United States in the Young Communist League, were developing a new approach to the race question that broke radically with anything previously proposed on the American left. Haywood and Nasanov argued that blacks in the South were trapped in semi-feudal conditions for the foreseeable future, locked in by economic underdevelopment and segregation. In these conditions, black Americans became an oppressed nation. Communists should therefore raise the demand for self-determination in the Black Belt and support the ambitions for nationhood that naturally grew out of the oppression blacks suffered there.



A map of the Black Belt, which Harry Haywood and other Communists saw as constituting an oppressed nation.

At the Eighth Congress of the Comintern, in the summer of 1928, Haywood and Nasanov put this theory forward. It quickly became entangled in the factional fights still wracking the American party. Some black communists were also ambivalent. Otto Hall, Harry Haywood's brother, was particularly opposed to the thesis. He argued that it ignored class differences among black Americans and that its advocates were guilty of seeing the "American Negro problem" only through their experience with national minorities in Europe and the East. James Ford, who had been recruited through the ANLC, was similarly skeptical. Discussions about whether the race question was really a national question, he argued, were distractions from the party's actual failure to establish a real base among black workers.

These doubts were not enough to derail the thesis after the Comintern leadership got behind it, however, and the thesis became official Communist International policy. But national self-determination was, after the implosion of Garveyism in the mid 1920s, far from the agenda of most of the struggles against racism in the United States, and the party found little political space to agitate around the demand of self-determination in the Black Belt.

The Black Belt Thesis, then, did not play the role of focusing the party's attention for the first time on the race question. Like SP members before them, early members of the CP figured out quite early that confronting the color line

would be of the utmost importance to their party. By 1925, they had already surpassed the SP in their attention to the dynamics of black politics and in their analysis of the relationship between the fight against racism and the fight against capitalism. The politics that allowed the CP to play such an important role in the black liberation struggle during the 1930s were forged, not in Moscow of 1928, but in the United States of the mid 1920s by black and white American communists.

The Legacy of Early American Socialism

Despite the obloquy heaped on socialists for supposedly ignoring the race question, or subordinating it to class, American socialism has a record in confronting black oppression that is unmatched by other political traditions. The intellectual roots of this tradition run back to its founding, and extend through the first few decades of the twentieth century, when the SP and then the CP predominated.

The political ideas pioneered in these years by American socialists would exert a profound influence on the trajectory of black struggle for much of the subsequent decades. The CP's attempt to unite the black struggle for equality with the revolutionary workers movement became, by the mid 1930s, a strategy contending for hegemony in the black movement. For decades to follow, American radicals of many stripes saw the development of radical black workers organizations as a key task.

Amid the radicalization of the 1960s, black nationalism returned with a force not seen since Garvey's movement in the 1920s, and analyses drawing on the framework of nations and self-determination once more were common currency. The national framework was bolstered both by black nationalists — who analogized black oppression in the United States to the struggle of the decolonizing nations of Africa — as well as Marxists. From the [Black Panthers](#) to the [League of Revolutionary Black Workers](#), black Marxists drew on metaphors of colonialism to describe the source of black oppression.

This strain of analysis carried with it both strengths and severe limitations. Its strength was identifying the causes of black oppression as resolutely structural, rooted in economic relationships of exploitation. Its weaknesses, however, were devastating. While the analogy with national oppression had, since Lenin's time, helped socialists understand the strategic importance of the black liberation struggle, the purveyors of the colonial analysis tended to treat it less as an analogy and more as an equivalence. The result was a tendency to treat both the black and white populations monolithically, as though white capitalists and workers alike benefited from black exploitation, whereas black workers and

black elites were bound together in a common subordinate status. This papering over of class structures within each racial group served not only to cut black radicals of this era off from potential alliances with radicalizing white workers, but it also tended to obscure the threat posed by a rising black elite class to liberation movements of all kinds.

If the race-nation analogy in the early 1920s enabled socialists to approach the race question with new creativity, the identification of the two categories in the '60s and '70s became an ossified dogma that obscured some of the most basic facts about racial formation in the United States. Today, these frameworks have faded from the foreground of racial politics. The Black Lives Matter movement, at its height in 2014–15, brought radical activism against racial oppression [back into American politics](#). At the same time, however, the long retreat of the American left was evident in the movement's politics. Strategic perspectives like internal colonialism or interracial workers' solidarity were, by and large, absent, replaced by academic frameworks such as "[Afro-Pessimism](#)." Even as the movement confronted spectacles like a black mayor and black district attorney in Baltimore crushing [popular protest](#), the analytic frameworks that would allow it to analyze such processes failed to find popular articulation. For contemporary radicals, there is no debate over whether black equality is a demand to be supported. Yet other debates from the early twentieth century point to political problems that remain unsolved today. In particular, the vision that animated socialists from Hubert Harrison to Claude McKay to Robert Minor — the fusion of the movement for black equality with a radical workers movement — remains elusive. Today, as socialism finds new resonance with a nation confronting a dismal future of inequality, ecological devastation, and continued racial oppression, radicals have a chance to recover this perspective. If socialists today can be as open, creative, and militant as their comrades were a century ago, a dark future can, perhaps, be brightened.