

*Leninism and the U.S. Revolutionary Struggle Against
Racism*

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The central cause of the split between the 2nd International and the break-away parties and forces which formed the 3rd International lay only imprecisely on divisions over reform versus revolution. Instead, argues the late communist philosopher Domenico Losurdo, the 2nd International's adherence to a white supremacist imaginary embracing a teleology in which "barbaric" denizens of the colonized world through the progressive mechanisms of capitalist colonialism would experience "uplift" drives Lenin to seek a break. Losurdo brands the conservative side of this world-historical split as adherents of the racial concept of "herrenvolk democracy," the belief that one's racial community, in its inherent biological or cultural or civilizational superiority, is alone worthy of the benefits of socialistic equality.¹ "Herrenvolk democracy" serves as the basis of white supremacy in settler-colonial societies such as the U.S., Canada, and Australia, the racial theories of the Nazi regime in the 1930s, and most subsequent neo-Nazi formations.

Lenin vigorously resists racist dogma, especially that which seems to infuse and link the 2nd International social democratic parties with the imperialist bourgeoisies. He equates the socialist version of this racist creed with bourgeois national chauvinism, sees its consequences in the erasure of revolutionary class struggle, the turn to reformism, and the conservatism of the labor aristocracy. He regards it as a primary source of disempowering divisions within the international working class. By the early 1920s, Lenin's appeals to white U.S. socialists and communists to oppose white supremacy and to address their own, as well as U.S. systemic, racism finally resulted in a transformation in how Marxists fought it.

¹Domenico Losurdo, "Lenin and *Herrenvolk* Democracy." In Sebastien Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Zizek, eds., *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a Politics of Truth*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, 239-252

By that time, Lenin grasps the particular racist oppression under which African Americans struggled. In his 1914 pamphlet, *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, he argues for the right of nations to self-determination, that is, the right to secede from “oppressor nations,” establish their independent nation-states, to full equality within any particular polity, and the elimination of all privileges based on national identity or religious identity. Lenin sees these principles as the basis of full working-class democracy, which create a foundation for unified working-class power.²

The socialist duty, Lenin argues, of the proletariat is loyalty to an international alliance or “amalgamation” of all workers in the joint struggle for full democracy, full equality, and socialism. If workers refuse to shed nationalist prejudices or privileges based on identity, they allow themselves to be drawn into the hegemonic orbit of their country’s ruling class rather than their correct place in a strategic international alliance of workers. Such a disastrous choice aborts their liberation and class destiny, as well as those of the colonized peoples of the world. So, how does Losurdo get from Lenin’s discourse on national self-determination, to a critique of racism and white supremacy? In his essay, Losurdo does not develop the discussion much and raises as many questions as he answers. So, my proposal here is to develop a research agenda that aims to follow more of Lenin’s thoughts on nationalism and self-determination to explore the idea, and to explore how those theories of anti-colonialism, proletarian-oriented national self-determination, anti-racist struggle, and working-class revolutionary struggle intersect in the early 20th century U.S.

Just months before publishing *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, Lenin published a lengthy essay titled “Critical Remarks on the National Question” (1913) in which he criticizes liberal, democratic, and nationalistic ideologies that threaten working-class unity and a broader united democratic front. While most of his statements focus geographically on Eastern Europe, explicitly denouncing “Great Russian” chauvinism and anti-Semitism, he also deploys an essential example from the U.S. that is worth close study. He calls for a rejection of forced assimilation of national minorities through coercive educational measures that suppress their languages and cultures. At the same time, he criticizes “cultural autonomy” schemes, especially those ginned-up by intellectuals or elites within the oppressor nation. Such projects seemed intent on chauvinistic segregation and the creation of second-class status for national minorities. “In practice, the plan for ‘extra-territorial’ or ‘cultural-national’ autonomy could mean only one thing: the division of educational affairs according to nationality,” he wrote. He added that cultural-national autonomists within oppressed nations who supported such ideas essentially sided with pro-segregationist demagogues.

By fostering a classless nation idea and thus dissolving the alliance of workers in the op-

²V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*. Vol. 20. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972, 393-454.

pressed nation with workers in the oppressor nation, most nationalisms weakened the struggle for full democracy and working-class internationalism. Working-class internationalism and the most comprehensive democracy are strategic elements of a more advanced socialist infrastructure. To develop this argument, Lenin cited the example of Jim Crow segregation in the U.S. South:

In the United States of America the division of the States into the Northern and Southern holds to this day in all departments of life; the former possess the greatest traditions of freedom and of struggle against the slave-owners; the latter possess the greatest traditions of slave-ownership, survivals of persecution of the Negroes, who are economically oppressed and culturally backward (44 percent of Negroes are illiterate, and 6 percent of whites), and so forth. In the Northern States Negro children attend the same schools as white children do. In the South there are separate ‘national,’ or racial, whichever you please, schools for Negro children. I think this is the sole instance of actual ‘nationalization’ of schools.³

Two crucial features of this statement stand out as relevant to a fuller explanation of Losurdo’s hypothesis. First, this statement is notable in that his reference to Jim Crow segregation highlighted the nature of racist segregation and its imposition of oppressive and exploitative conditions for Black people that linked the South to its worst traditions of slavery. On its face, even with its rosy, even inaccurate, picture of Northern society, it is an indictment of white supremacy. Second, in the penultimate sentence, Lenin slips easily between the categories of nation and race. The word *or* after the adjective *national* that links it to the word *racial* suggests the equivalence of those two terms in the author’s mind. In constructing his sentence in this fashion, Lenin, who offers no specific or detailed analysis of characteristics of “nations” or “races” in the U.S. context, implies that Southern whites comprise the oppressor nation. In contrast, Southern Blacks, approximately 9 of 10 Black people in the entire U.S. at the time and about 4 in 10 southerners, are an oppressed nation. His statement characterizes Jim Crow laws and customs as coercive tools of that oppression and sets Southern Blacks forward as potential candidates for national self-determination. Further, it positions the white section of the working class in the position of making a critical choice. Either it could side with the white bourgeoisie as participants in the white supremacist oppressor nation, or resist, build meaningful international alliances with oppressed Black workers and peasants and wage a class struggle against the exploitative class and oppressing nation.

By inserting this specific example of national oppression into his discussion of self-determination, Lenin points to the working-class’s revolutionary duty to fight racial, or “national,” privilege;

³Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 20. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972, 17-51.

to demand full equality as foundational to full democracy; to reject forced assimilation of racial, or “national,” minorities; to enforce “absolute tolerance” for cultural differences among the multinational working class; and to wage a consistent battle against racism, or what Communists would come to call racial or “national” chauvinism, within the minds and actions of the revolutionary working-class members of the oppressor race, or “nation.”

Cornel West observes critically fault-lines in Marxist theories of race and anti-racist struggles. Specifically, he criticizes the U.S. Marxist-Leninist left for its distortion of the issue as a *national* rather than a racial question. This distortion mutates the political action and analysis because it ignores the role of racism within social institutions and among everyday people where it primarily is reproduced and plays a role in sustaining capitalist accumulation.⁴

Recent research, however, indicates that not only did 3rd International theorists and Communist Party USA theorists and activists regarded the question of white supremacy as a racial question, a struggle of African Americans specifically, to resist white racism which should be aided and abetted by white communists and revolutionary working-class people. Timothy V. Johnson argues that even before the establishment of the CPUSA officially, leading thinkers in the divided communist movement developed “an understanding that the struggle against African American oppression was distinct, while at the same time, intertwined with the broader class struggle.”⁵ Key here is Johnson’s designation of the simultaneous distinction and intertwining of the two systems.

This research explores Lenin’s thought on the national question as it relates to the Black Freedom Movement in the U.S. and the development of an “intersectional” theory of a revolutionary struggle against capitalism and its white supremacist “infrastructure.”⁶

⁴Cornel West, “Marxist Theory and the Specificity of Afro-American Oppression,” in Cary Nelson, ed. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988, 21.

⁵Timothy V. Johnson, “The Communist Party and the African American Question.” In Tony Pecinovsky, ed., *Faith in the Masses: Essays Celebrating 100 Years of the Communist Party, USA*. New York: International Publishers, 2020, 155.

⁶I draw on Singh’s argument that racisms are U.S. capitalism’s “infrastructure.” Nikhil Pal Singh, “On Race, Violence, and So-Called Primitive Accumulation,” *Social Text* Vol. 34, No. 3 (September 2016): 30.