Our history

The Russian Revolution, Black Bolshevichki and Social Reproduction

- Features -

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In his 1981 book on the February Revolution, Tsuyoshi Hasegawa includes the story of a young girl walking towards a line of Cossack troops who had come to confront women demonstrators on International Women’s Day.

The women had amassed to protest the ongoing war, high food prices, and the need, as the contemporary slogan had it, of “bread for the workers!” Hasegawa writes of the girl, “she brought out a bunch of red roses and held it towards the officer. His unexpected acceptance has been seen as a symbol of both peace and revolution.” For Jane McDemid and Anna Hillyar, authors of *Midwives of the Revolution: Female Bolsheviks and Women Workers in 1917*, the incident underscores not only the centrality of *Bolshevichki* or female Bolsheviks to the inception of the Revolution, but their corresponding program to fuse “economic” with “political” demands. As Wendy Goldman has written of the Revolution, *Bolshevichki* argued that “capitalism had created a new contradiction, felt most painfully by women, between the demands of work and the needs of family.” Women’s oppression, they argued, was located in labor performed in the so-called “private” sphere of the home, a special burden especially for female proletarians. In turn, women like Alexandra Kollontai repeatedly pushed Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders to fight for the socialization of housework, and for the “withering away of the family” as an oppressive bourgeois institution.

From our vantage point today, we understand the fight for “bread and roses” in the Russian Revolution as an effort to fill a gap in Marxism’s endeavor to comprehend women’s oppression under capitalism. A defining moment in that understanding remains Lise Vogel’s 1983 book *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*. The book asserted that where Marx and Engels had fallen short in their analysis of the family was in seeing the interrelationship of so-called “domestic” life and labor and the workplace. Specifically, Vogel argued that under capitalism women played a key role in reproducing “labor power” necessary for the reproduction of the capitalist system as a whole. Vogel writes:

Class struggle over conditions of production represents the central dynamic of social development in societies characterized by exploitation. In these societies, surplus labor is appropriated by a dominant class, and an essential condition for production is the renewal of a subordinated class of direct producers committed to the labor process. Ordinarily, generational replacement provides most of the new workers needed to replenish this class, and women’s capacity to bear children therefore plays a critical role in class society. In propertied classes women’s oppression flows from their role in the maintenance and inheritance of property; in subordinate classes female oppression derives from women’s involvement in processes that renew direct producers, as well as their involvement in production.

How then might social reproduction theory function as a framework for analyzing specific historical forms of political practice? Here I use as case study the impact of the Russian Revolution on 20th century black radicals specifically black women radicals” drawn to its political example. As the image below suggests “Paul Adams’s 1971 poster for the National Union of Healthcare Employees (see Image 1) efforts to integrate and synthesize workplace and domestic struggles under capitalism is part of a living trajectory of black radical politics over the course of the 20th century. In what follows, I examine how black communist women in the U.S. used the Russian Revolution as intellectual and political framework in their struggle for black women’s workplace rights, for domestic workers’ rights, and for rights within the private abode of the home. Indeed, their attention to paid domestic laborers in the U.S. produced prescient insight into the contradiction Goldman notes had plagued the *Bolshevchiki* around the demands of work...
and the needs of family. Because their domestic work for whites was also paid labor, black women radicals came to an advanced analysis of the fundamental role of household labor in reproducing the capitalist system: their wages literally produced and reproduced the black laboring classes that were their own families. In the second part of the essay, I will pick up another piece of the historical thread, and look at how black activists in and around the Black Panther Party similarly looked to Russia 1917 as model for generating social service programs like free child care and free breakfast programs. To the Bolshevik cry for “soeland, peace and bread,” for example, the Panthers added food, clothes and education “staples of social provisioning. Social reproduction theory helps us perceive their urgent understanding of the disproportionate way in which the black working class was socially reproduced, the lack of and/or heavily racialized and gendered state support for that reproduction, and how black radicals sought to politically challenge such capitalist inequality through working in the social reproduction sphere and drawing attention to its vital functions.

Finally, while social reproduction theory was not a developed theoretical framework available to the earlier generations of black radicals under discussion here, their concrete political projects around social reproduction can be one basis for social reproduction theorists of today.

The stepping stones to an integrated analysis of women’s oppression under capitalism were carefully laid by Bolshevik women between the 1905 and 1917 revolutions. Recall the formation of women’s socialist clubs in St. Petersburg in 1905, the first 1908 All-Russian Women’s Congress sponsored by the Bolsheviks, the 1913 inaugural celebration of International Women’s Day, as well as the same year launch of Rabotnitsa, the Bolshevik paper for women workers. These events reflected the key material position of women in the Russian proletariat in 1914 half of factory workers were women and the political interventions of leading female socialists like Alexandra Kollontai. Kollontai joined the Bolsheviks in 1904, and was elected a delegate to the Petrograd Soviet in 1917. In the spring of 1917, she helped coordinate a city-wide laundresses’ union in St. Petersburg. In so doing, Kollontai sought to suture the broader political aims of Bolshevism to the social location of women: “To the schools, the hospitals, to housing, to maternity and childcare benefits? Nothing of the sort is happening. The people’s money is going to finance bloody skirmishes.” The success of Bolshevichki agitation within the party is evident in the well-known roster of achievements of the Revolution: day-care centers, paid maternity leave, divorce on demand, nursing breaks at work, and children’s food programs. A singular achievement of the Revolution, the Zhenotdel, or women’s department of the party, was established by the Central Committee in 1919 to broaden the definition of the “worker” to include women and peasants.

Black women drawn to the Communist Party of the United States after the Revolution had CPUSA emulation of the Bolsheviks in part to thank. In 1929, the Party established the Women’s Department of the Central Committee (the American Zhenotdel) and began publication of the newspaper The Working Woman, the American Rabonitsa. Its second issue featured an article on exorbitant Harlem rents, highlighting their effects on black women in the domestic sphere: “This strain, wrote reporter Grace Lamb, “falls heavily upon the Negro mothers and wives who must of necessity supplement their husbands small pay by their hard earnings. These women of the working class have borne the hardship of unsanitary housing conditions. Its third issue included a letter from a black domestic worker complaining of a 14 hour work day and combined pay with her husband barely enough to feed their 6 children. In response to her query “what can be done to better our condition,” an editor’s note replied, “Organization is the only way to fight effectively for better work conditions, shorter hours, and higher wages. Exploitation of the workers, Negro and white, can only be abolished by changing the present capitalist government into a workers government like that of the Soviet Union.”
This tentative analysis by the Communist Left of the lives of black working-class women under capitalism would cohere around the conditions of black women domestic workers. Here we turn to the significant theoretical contributions to the U.S. Communist movement by the likes of Louise Thompson Patterson, Esther Cooper Jackson, and Claudia Jones. Patterson’s April, 1936 essay from Working Woman, “Toward a Brighter Dawn,” can be considered in retrospect a pioneering moment in analysis of black domestic work as a nodal point within capitalism. Patterson’s essay was in the form of a report produced from coverage of a special WomenWoman’s Sub-Session of the Women’s Committee of the National Negro Congress, a united front organization first formed by the CPUSA in 1925, and another echo of Bolshevik organizing. Patterson was the first to use the phrase “triple exploitation” to describe the conditions of Negro women under capitalism as workers, as women, and as Negroes. What Patterson meant by “triple exploitation” is best understood via social reproduction theory’s emphasis on the integrated spheres of the domestic and the workplace. Patterson elaborated thus:

The economic crisis has placed the severest test upon the Negro woman. Representing the greatest proportion of unemployed workers in the country, Negroes are discriminated against in relief and work relief. Negroes must pay high rent for the worst housing in any city. Segregated Negro neighborhoods are invariably deficient in nurseries, playgrounds, health centers, schools. And in the face of such adverse conditions, Negro women must maintain and rear their families. [Ibid]

To return to an insight from Lise Vogel, “[i]n propertied classes’s oppression flows from their role in the maintenance and inheritance of property’s involvement in processes that renew direct producers, as well as their involvement in production.” For Patterson, black women constitute membership in a subordinate class exploited at work and oppressed at home, yet charged with the renewal of direct producers: Negro women must maintain and rear their families. Here the pathway she charts is also resonant with Vogel’s analysis. The National Negro Congress focus on working conditions of black domestic workers, included in Patterson’s report, speaks to that vocation’s dialectical capacity to reveal the simultaneous oppression of propertied classes (i.e. bourgeois white women) who help in the maintenance and inheritance of property, and black women workers who labor simultaneously at two sites which reproduce the capitalist system: the abode of domestic work, and the oppressive habitus of a deracinated Black social reproductive sphere of diminished schools, playgrounds, nurseries, and homes.

Esther Cooper Jackson’s seminal writing on black women domestics builds directly out from Patterson’s analysis. Jackson’s study of domestics was her M.A. Thesis at Oberlin College completed in 1940. Like Patterson, her concentration on working-class women drew a straight line to the Russian Revolution. Jackson cites in her study the Soviet’s Domestic Worker Order of 1926 which regulated conditions of employment for domestic workers and was part of their inclusion within Soviet trade unions after the Revolution. The title of Jackson’s study, “The Negro Woman Domestic Worker in Relation to Trade Unionism,” further indicates the Revolution’s influence. Jackson’s analysis of black domestic workers enacts several breakthroughs from a social reproduction perspective. First, it situates black domestic work of the 1930s, her period of focus, within the proletarianization of black labor generally after the Great Migration. Aware that black domestics were excluded from New Deal social provisioning like unemployment benefits, Jackson seeks to inscribe paid domestic laborers within the category of worker. Second, the essay inserts black paid domestic employment within an historical trajectory of capitalism, ebbing and flowing according to supply and demand, mechanization, and the economic conditions of employers. Third, the analysis situates white employers and black workers within a unitary understanding of capitalist exploitation. Jackson’s observation that time-saving labor devices in the middle-classes affected black domestic employment levels, for instance, provides an integrated perspective on women’s functional oppression under capitalism across class and race lines.
Most importantly, the essay’s call for overcoming the division through cooperation, but against the market itself. Cooper situates domestic labor within a shifting political economy of women’s oppression within capitalist modernity. She observes that from 1900 to 1914 the proportion of all Negro women employed in domestic personal declined due to a tendency towards smaller homes so that housewives could perform household duties alone or with one domestic worker. The bakeries, the clothing stores, laundries, dairies, etc., began to do work which was traditionally the role of the domestic worker. [13]

The increasing privatization of domestic labor was for Cooper an indicator of the ever-expanding integration of social reproduction into capitalist social relations. In this expansion, black women domestic workers were to be both canaries in a coal mine and what Marx called, speaking of slavery, a pivot of bourgeois industry. [14]

Indeed, it is Claudia Jones’s articulation of black women as pivot that was her signature contribution to analysis of black working-class life, one also with fealty to Bolshevichki roots. We can look at three Jones essays published in 1949 and 1950, respectively, that do this work. In her 1949 essay An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women published in Political Affairs, the premiere theoretical journal of the CPUSA, Jones argues to the party it is necessary to have a special approach to Negro women workers, far out of proportion to other women workers, are the main bread winners in their family. [15] Jones insists that the proletarianization of black women uniquely centralizes the double-burden of oppression and exploitation in domestic and workplace spheres, and the extractive perils under capitalism of wage-labor, or, euphemistically, bread-winning. Thus in a companion essay published the same year, We Seek Full Equality for Women Jones argued that the proletariat of Negro women was a barometer of the status of women (emphasis mine) and that the fight for the full economic, political and social equality of the Negro woman is in the vital self-interest of white workers, in the vital interest of the fight to realize equality for all women. [16] Jones here centers social reproduction analysis as hermeneutic: black women’s workplace exploitation as paid labor and domestic oppression as reproducers of the laboring class is an explanatory framework for diagnosing and challenging capitalism in totality. Her position may deliberately echo one of Jones’s influences elsewhere Clara Zetkin who argued in a speech at the 1890 founding Congress of the Second International, it is not women’s work per se which in competition with men’s work lowers wages, but rather the exploitation of female labor by the capitalists who appropriate it. [17] Jones and Zetkin both argue that capital’s exploitation and appropriation of women’s paid labor is a barometer of the exploitation of the working-class as a whole. As Jones puts it, the inequality of women stems from exploitation of the working class by the capitalist class. [18]

The influence of Zetkin and Bolshevichki feminism is more clearly pronounced in Jones 1950 essay International Women’s Day and the Struggle for Peace. The essay was originally written as a speech to be delivered on International Women’s Day, March 8, 1950. As is well known, Women’s Day was first celebrated by American women in 1908, but designated International Women’s Day at the International Socialist Conference in 1910 at Zetkin’s initiative. In her essay, Jones Bolshevizes the origins of IWD, pointing out that Lenin was present at the International Socialist Conference meeting, and had argued in 1907 that the exploitation of toiling women question be specifically mentioned in Socialist programme because of the special problems, needs and demands of toiling women. Jones ambitiously seeks to use March 8th to build a new united front against U.S. war and imperialism. The speech celebrates more than 50 demonstrations across the U.S. for Peace, freedom, and women’s rights, a supplemental echo of the Bolshevik cry for Peace, Land, and Bread. As with March 8th, 1917, women, and now black women, are to be a vanguard in this new united front. Harriet Tubman and...
Sojourner Truth are invoked as âEurosoemilitant women proletarians of the textile workers.âEuros âEurosoewomen,âEuros  writes Jones, âEurosoewho are the most oppressed of all the oppressed, have never stood aloof and could not stand aloof from the great march of emancipation.âEuros [19] They âEurosoemay and should becomeâEuros¦a regular army of the working class fighting shoulder to shoulder with the great army of the proletariat.âEuros [20] This is an echo here of other contemporaneous claims for the autonomy of black working class struggles. [21] Most important for our purposes, JonesâEuros”s characterization of black women as the âEurosoemost oppressed of the oppressedâEuros  moved towards generalizing black womenâEuros”s experience of racism and sexism as endemic to capitalism as a system. As Sue Ferguson has written,

While (like her Communist Party brethren) Jones saw the key to (Black) womenâEuros”s emancipation as fighting for the betterment of their wages and conditions, she moved beyond them in arguing that labor isnâEuros”t just an âEurosoeeconomicâEuros  issue. Because the American workforce is so thoroughly racialized, there can be no improvement for all until racism is also confronted and destroyed. This is a radical and important innovation. It situates womenâEuros”s paid labor as inextricably tied not only to sexism, but also to racism, raising the specter of âEuros” if not fully analyzing âEuros” a wider systemic logic.âEuros [22]

A full reckoning of black communist womenâEuros”s engagement with Bolshevechki thought is beyond the scope of this article. What can be said here is that their constellation expands our universe of understanding of the political lineage of 20th century social reproduction analysis. To complete this provisional genealogy, I will turn in brief to 1960s Black Power politics, particularly the politics of the Black Panther Party. A healthy renaissance of scholarship on black women in the BPP by scholars like Bettye Collier-Thomas (Sisters in the Struggle), Robyn C. Spencer (The Revolution Has Come) and Donna Murch (Living for the City) combined with first-person accounts by surviving Panthers like Kathleen Cleaver and Ericka Huggins (subject of a forthcoming biography by Mary Phillips) has begun to redraw the gender boundaries of the movement and the era. [23]

Kiran Garcha, in an important essay published in 2015 in Viewpoint, âEurosoeBringing the Vanguard Back Home: Revisiting the Black PanthersâEuros” Sites of Class Struggle,âEuros  pursues a train of thought that warrants further development, by examining the âEurosoehome and family unitâEuros  as political locations within Party practice. As Garcha notes, âEurosoethe PanthersâEuros” anti-colonial politics were often transmitted across generations not in Party offices or community centers, but behind closed doors, in the intimate spaces of living rooms, kitchens, and backyards.âEuros [24]25

As my own starting point, I will single out point 10 of the PantherâEuros”s original 10 point program. It is the most capacious demand, a veritable laundry list of social reproduction keywords: âEurosoeWe want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.âEuros  We can recognize again the immediate echoes of 1917 âEuros” âEurosoeland, Bread, PeaceâEuros  supplemented by traditional claims from the âEurosoedomesticâEuros  sphere: education, clothing, housing. As recent historical studies have noted, the Panthers were proffering a version of Lyndon JohnsonâEuros”s âEurosoegreat societyâEuros  enacted through a politics of anti-capitalist self-determination. [25] Hence the Panthers well known Free Breakfast Program, its establishment of the Oakland Community School as an alternative to what were perceived as racist white-dominated schools, and its establishment of PeopleâEuros”s Free Medical Clinics. As Alondra Nelson has ably observed, the Panthers medical program was a âEurosoehealth social movement,âEuros  or âEurosoepolitics by other means.âEuros [26]

I would argue that insights from social reproduction theory best elucidate the âEurosoepoliticsâEuros  and wider âEurosoesocial movementâEuros  she describes. Most of the party cadre involved in the Panther health program were women. In addition to screening for sickle cell anemia, services included gynecological screening, pap smears, and STD testing. In 1971, women in the Party pushed for expanded birth control on the basis that extensive child-rearing could limit political participation for both men and women. In a 1972 BPP position paper, Audrea Jones recommended that both men and women attend birth control classes. Also in 1972, the Central Committee of the BPP recommended establishing a âEurosoeplanned ParenthoodâEuros  program within the organization; in 1974,
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Party leadership issued a directive that members should use birth control. [27] The emphasis on what might be called reproductive and sexual justice for Black women is a political index to what Dorothy Roberts has referred to as the âEurosoekillingâEuroso of Black bodies under capitalism, as well as a centering of compulsory reproductive capacity âEuroso and responsibility âEuroso for working-class women to regenerate the system. Reproductive and social reproductive justice, in other words, was for the Panthers a specifically working-class issue, part of the PartyâEuroso s wider âEurosoeanti-povertyâEuroso analysis, and an index to the double burden role of black working women as reproducers of labor power under a capitalist state with few safety nets. [28]

A final snapshot of the PantherâEuroso s anti-capitalist social reproduction politics comes into sharp focus in Emory DouglasâEuroso s iconic 1972 lithograph âEurosoeVote for Survival.âEuroso (Image 2) The image projects a âEurosoelumpenâEuroso black woman as class conscious embodiment of Panther support. Her handheld sign, âEurosoeVote for SurvivalâEuroso pointed not just to the PartyâEuroso s electoral turn that year, but to the Panthers 1972 âEurosoeBlack Community Survival Conference,âEuroso which included, literally, a âEurosoebootie in every bagâEuroso and voter registration form for attendees. In her pocket, the woman also carries a pair of childrenâEuroso s booties bearing a tag reading, âEurosoeDavid Hilliard, PeopleâEuroso s Free Shoe Program.âEuroso The image argues that the road to revolutionary consciousness passes through the home, and that demands for âEurosoebread and shoesâEuroso suture the âEurosoeeconomicâEuroso to âEurosoepoliticalâEuroso demands. In this portrait of a new revolutionary, the Panthers announce an all-encompassingâEuroso if reformist âEurosoeanti-capitalist critique of the system, and a new figure in the vanguard.

Susan Ferguson and David McNally speak of social reproduction theoryâEuroso s capacity to illuminate social movements that demand âEurosoethe end to the differential degradation of human life, full and communal access to the means of subsistence, control over our own human bodies.âEuroso [29] The narrative I have outlined, from 1905 St. Petersburg, to 1972 Oakland, the âEurosoelongâEuroso era of social reproduction as it were, also helps us understand how and why capitalism itself has so long identified black womanhood as a threat to the capitalist stateâEuroso s endeavors to manage class relationships. Despite the best efforts of Bolshevikki, black communists, and Black Panthers, capitalâEuroso s general tendency to foist the costs of social provisioning onto the poor and working-class has produced its enemy more often than not in the figure of the black woman. Ronald ReaganâEuroso s âEurosoewelfare queenâEuroso is, from a social reproduction standpoint, the Bolshevikki at the gate. ReaganismâEuroso s, and neoliberalisms, recurring attacks on what was once known as the âEurosoewelfare stateâEuroso have repeatedly produced a depressingly familiar language of class domination. âEurosoeIt isâEuroso write Salar Mohandesie and Emma Teitelman, that the assault on social welfare spoke a racist and sexist language. Black mothers were demonized as dishonest, irresponsible, and promiscuous; blacks and Latinx people were vilified as criminals or indolent abusers. The hope was to convince other workers, such as poor or unemployed white males, to blame the âEurosoeblack welfare queenâEuroso for their own conditions, rather than the capitalists. In this way, the battle over social reproduction played an unsurpassed role in turning the heterogenous sectors of the working class against one another. [30]

We know this story so well that we dare not repeat it. What we should repeat on this 100th anniversary of 1917 is the political challenge embedded in explanatory frameworks by which we know the past and present. Our contemporary battles against Trumpism, against the alt-right, against the viral misogyny and racism of our times, against creeping fascism, would do well to have more, not less Bolshevikki if we hope to heal what ails us. There is nothing stale in Claudia JonesâEuroso s nearly 70 year-old appeal: âEurosoebread and peace,âEuroso we can renew social reproduction cries of âEurosoeland, bread and peace,âEuroso.
and forge what Louise Patterson called nearly a century ago "a brighter dawn."

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[3] Ibid p12


[13] Cooper Jackson, Toward a Brighter Dawn in Relation to Trade Union Production. See Marxist.org


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[16] Ibid 166


[21] I have in mind here C.L.R. James’s 1948 claim for Black working-class struggle as having â€œvitality and a validity of its ownâ€ which â€œhas got a great contribution to make to the development of the proletariat in the United States.â€ C.L.R. James, â€œThe Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in US,â€ Fourth International, Vol.9 No.8 (December 1948): 242-251. see Marxist.org


[29] Ferguson and McNally, â€œSocial Reproduction Beyond Intersectionality,â€ see Viewpoint.org 31 Oct 2015