



THE  
POLITICAL  
LIFE OF  
BLACK  
COMMUNIST

**LEFT OF KARL MARX**

**CLAUDIA**

**JONES**

**Carole Boyce Davies**

## Claudia's Communism

We Communists adhere to the fundamental belief that complete and lasting equality of imperialist oppressed nations of peoples can be guaranteed only with the establishment of Socialism.

CLAUDIA JONES, "ON THE RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION FOR THE NEGRO PEOPLE IN THE BLACK BELT," 1946

For even with all the power your Honor holds, how can you decide to mete out justice for the only act which I proudly plead guilty, and one moreover, which by your own prior rulings constitutes no crime—that of holding Communist ideas; of being a member and officer of the Communist Party of the United States?

CLAUDIA JONES, "SPEECH TO THE COURT, FEBRUARY, 1953"

Claudia Jones offered a consistent and unabashed identification of herself as a communist, as Marxist-Leninist, even in situations when she was in grave danger from the state's punitive mechanisms. Her courtroom speech is explicit in making her philosophical and ideological positions clear in a public and official place; it was not a plea for leniency, but a demonstration that black women were also thinkers, held ideological positions, and could assert them.

Claudia Jones joined the Communist Party USA in her youth because it provided her with the best interpretation of her experience of racism and because it explained best the larger social conditions which she had experienced. The Communist Party at that time was actively engaged in the Scottsboro Boys case,<sup>36</sup> defending them from possible lynching and in the process providing examples of black men and women who were activists and committed communists. Claudia entered a visible black left community. She says: "I was, like millions of negro people, and white progressives and people stirred by this heinous frameup. I was impressed by the communist speakers

who explained the reasons for this **brutal crime against young Negro boys**; and who related the Scottsboro case to the **struggle of the Ethiopian people against fascism, and Mussolini's invasion**" ("Autobiographical History," 5).

The "communist speakers" she identified were black communists in Harlem. From this early involvement, at age eighteen, Jones experiences a rapid rise through the party hierarchy and as a journalist in Communist Party organs, developing and enacting specific party positions as she advanced. She consistently upheld the positions of the Communist Party USA, though she modified and innovated them in light of her views on race and gender issues, as I have shown throughout this work. The larger ideological framework for her analyses always remains Marxist-Leninist.

My intent here is not to reevaluate the principles of Marxism-Leninism; there are numerous works that already claim to do this.<sup>37</sup> Rather, my concern is to show how Claudia Jones used her understanding of communism to analyze the conditions in which she saw black people, especially black women, subordinated. Many of her essays do not go into detail about what communism is,<sup>38</sup> though she does provide definitions and repeatedly identifies herself as a communist of Marxist-Leninist orientation. Marx, we know, provided both a theory of society in which there would be a movement from feudalism through capitalism to socialism and an analysis of the nature of class exploitation under capitalism, and a sketch of the larger principles of a socialist society. Lenin would advance these ideas further, and would add issues of colonialism and imperialism and an analysis of women in society, thus summarized: "The major components of Marxism-Leninism are dialectical and historical materialism as a method of analysis, political economy as the study of the class relationships to the means of production and the level of productive forces, and the theory of scientific communism (the structure and process of communist societies). More narrowly defined, Leninism is that tendency within Marxist thought which accepts the major theoretical contributions of Lenin to revolutionary Marxism."<sup>39</sup>

In "On the Right to Self-Determination for the Negro People in the Black Belt" Claudia Jones demonstrates her understanding of the applicability of Leninism to the colonial question and, in particular, how it is linked to the definition of black people in the U.S. South as an oppressed nation, internally colonized, citing an unfinished 1913 essay by Lenin on the national and colonial question.<sup>40</sup> Having specified the nature of the contours of the black

community in the **U.S. South** and how they fit the definition of a nation in terms of **language, territory, economic life, and common culture**, Claudia challenged the revisionist perspective of Earl Browder<sup>41</sup> as it related particularly to black self-determination, insisting: "It is only by helping to interconnect the partial demands with the right of self-determination, that we Communists, in concert with other progressive forces, can contribute guidance to the struggle for complete equality for the Negro people" (74). The application of the communist notion of self-determination to the situation of black people in the South constitutes for Jones an uncompromising stand against imperialism and for socialism, which she saw as the only ideology operable at the time by which any state could guarantee full equality for all its people.

Within her ideological framework, particularly while she was still living and working in the United States, the Soviet Union seemed to be the site for the most advanced human relations for women; she saw it as demonstrating the truth, as advanced by William Foster and others, that only under socialism would the human being be liberated. In her 1951 essay "Foster's Theoretical and Political Guidance to Work among Women," Jones had indicated that "the emancipation of woman is possible only under Socialism": "Under Socialism, full enjoyment of equal rights by women is *guaranteed* by the very nature of a society in which classes and exploitation are abolished" (78). In hindsight, we can see that this was an idealistic position. While it is true that at that time Soviet women were being offered opportunities in employment not open to women in the United States until the women's movement of the 1970s, full emancipation of women in the USSR remained elusive, as subsequent studies would show.

From some angles, Jones's positions can be read by some as ones informed largely by Communist Party literature and indoctrination and idealism. Her writings, however, never defend hardline Stalinist programs. Jones was well read in Leninism, and recognized that Lenin had advanced views on the colonial question, as he did on the woman question. She would therefore have found Stalinist positions untenable, even though she would have supported the Communist Party's links with the Soviet Union, which dated back to the Second World War. The violence of Stalinism and its strong dictatorship alienated many communists in the 1950s, even as they struggled to understand and represent Communist Party official positions on Stalinism. Khru-

schev's "secret speech," "On the Cult of Personality," which denounced Stalin, would be delivered in 1956, a year after Claudia had left the United States and several years before her own visit to the Soviet Union in 1963. Claudia Jones, then, was not a Stalinist; but she also did not see Stalin as the problem — for her, the enemy was not Stalin but growing U.S. imperialism.<sup>42</sup>

Harold Cruse's<sup>43</sup> controversial position that black activists in the Communist Party were unimaginative and followed the communist line "without deviation," and that the Communist Party USA was too pro-Soviet therefore pro-Stalin has been challenged by numerous scholars. When he was writing his critique (first published in 1967), Cruse felt, among other things, that black activists were unable take what was applicable from back-to-Africa Garveyism and Marxism in order to "lay the foundation for a new school of revolutionary ideas" (*The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 151). He claimed that by toeing the line to defend communism and repressing internal critique of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party USA became a conventional Communist Party.<sup>44</sup> Cruse's argument would have perhaps been more nuanced had he examined some of the ideas of black activists of the time, especially women like Claudia Jones.<sup>45</sup> A number of black women, while participating in communist party theoretics, attempted nonetheless to create a political praxis that brought together an assemblage of positions hitherto defined as disparate. This assemblage of related positions into one theoretical framework would be the basis for the definition of black feminism in the generation following Claudia Jones.

Claudia's work in England and her visits to the Soviet Union and China provide another layer to an understanding of her communism and of her own practical interpretations of communism. But unfortunately Claudia died soon after these visits and was not able to leave us any detailed account of them; we therefore do not have the kind of information that would have enabled a more complete analysis. Nonetheless, since for many it was axiomatic that if one were pro-Soviet then one could not be also pro-Maoism, Claudia's visit to China and her growing appreciation of Chinese communism, advances another feature of her special brand of (left of Karl Marx) communism.

Another interesting summary of this position is that "Jones was fiercely loyal to the Party and yet she was not a blind advocate of all CPUSA positions. She was a classical Marxist who supported the idea that the working class/the proletariat would bring about social and economic change."<sup>46</sup> In this regard,

Jones was not unlike a range of African American, African, Caribbean, and other third world intellectual-activists who saw in Marxism-Leninism an interpretive framework for understanding, resisting, and redefining their colonial situations. Jones herself makes this point as she recounts how she came to join the Communist Party. Her outspoken support for the Cuban Revolution is indicative of her leanings on these issues, which came to the forefront when she moved to London.<sup>47</sup>

The invitation that Jones received from the editors of *Soviet Women* (a women's magazine) to visit the Soviet Union offered her another opportunity to move beyond the "woman question" of the party to a fuller understanding of the roles of women and to a more direct and personal association with them. Claudia May sees her as being "inspired by the progress made by the Stalin administration to create programs that placed women and workers at the center of domestic policies" ("Nuances of Un-American Literature(s)," 4). But nowhere in Jones's numerous articles is there any obvious defense of Stalinist excesses. Instead, Jones's communism, Marxist-Leninist in orientation, became the analytical and political tool that she used to analyze the conditions of black people and women in the United States and subsequently to critique British racism and understand the decolonization movements around the world.

Cedric Robinson, in *Black Marxism*, sees the limits in Marxism precisely in its inability to deal with racism, which in his words "ran deep in the bowels of Western culture" (82): "Marxists have often argued that national liberation movements in the Third World are secondary to the interests of the industrial proletariat in the capitalist metropolises, or that they need to be understood only as the social efflux of world capitalism. . . . What is least defensible though, is how scant the attention paid to intra-European racialism has been" (84).

The lukewarm reception Jones received from the Communist Party of Great Britain (such a contrast to the resounding sendoff from the Communist Party USA) is absolutely pivotal in understanding her shifting political orientation and practice in London. Claudia had already experienced and struggled against racism in the United States, and in the Communist Party USA in particular. She would have to begin the struggle all over again in the United Kingdom. Gertrude Elias reports that when she met Jones, soon after her arrival, she remarked that Jones must be busy going all over the country,

lecturing and so on, for the Communist Party. Claudia replied that as far as the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) were concerned, she might as well be dead.<sup>48</sup> Trevor Carter in *Shattering Illusions* describes both the attraction of the Communist Party to West Indian workers in London, but also their disillusionment with it: "Racism within the communist party, both at the theoretical level and in practical and personal terms, added its weight to the growing disillusionment and frustration of many of the black comrades in the fifties and sixties" (59). Carter describes efforts by black comrades to raise the issue within the CPGB (60-61). He indicates as well that another major upset to many Caribbean party members' understanding of the aims of communism was "Khrushchev's speech to the 20th Congress of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] in 1956, where the political crimes of Stalin were announced and denounced." Still, as he describes it, "Many of those who were in the party at the time say that it was not so much the British Party they felt they had joined, but rather the international Communist movement. . . . The Soviet Union was at the heart of that international movement and had been seen to play a key role in the anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist struggles of which the black Communists in Britain were a product and a part" (59). It was into this context that Claudia Jones stepped, when she arrived in Britain in late December 1955.

Carter reports, though, that for the black communists in London at that time, Claudia's knowledge and example would play an important role: "Many of us who got frustrated and grumbled were sustained in our political faith by the encouragement of Claudia Jones" (61). And in the end, her political experience and background would be vital. Thus, in dealing with the racist bases of immigration, "the Communist Party, for all its imperfections, [was] the only British political party in complete opposition to quotas and controls for Commonwealth immigration" (70). It is significant that Carter uses Claudia's analysis of this to make this point (70-71), for in other places he discusses her ability to use astute analysis to get at the heart of relevant political issues.

The Caribbean leftists, many of whom had been or continued to be members of the Caribbean Labour Congress and the Communist Party, saw her as providing new leadership. So while she was an important member of a cadre of black and white communists in the United States that struggled within the Communist Party against racism in its ranks and in the larger society, in London, there was no equivalent functioning grouping. Jones be-

came instead **the leader of a Caribbean communist community outside of the party**, which broadened its alliances to include a range of other allied activist groups. The space for the kind of work she was skilled at doing and the kind of cadre with which she could work would have to be created. So, while she remained a Communist Party member, it was in the international communist movement sense, and that could also mean for her organizing outside of Communist Party structures and directly in black and working-class communities in England.

Thus, ironically, deportation and London provided the opportunity for the kind of distancing that would allow her to develop a fuller pan-Africanist and Caribbean community orientation. Technically, Jones was always a communist first and foremost. Thus, Billy Strachan, an ardent Communist Party member, in his discussion of Claudia's relation to the party, states that there were no gaps in her relationship with them: "There was no difference between the Communist Party and Claudia at that time."<sup>49</sup> In other words, Claudia would never disavow the Communist Party and her commitment to a socialist reordering of society that is at its base. What one observes instead is an operational distance, as far as her own conduct is concerned.

It is here that the issue of her relationship with her fellow Trinidadian, C. L. R. James, enters, for James was an avowed Trotskyist, pan-Africanist, and advocate of the decentered state,<sup>50</sup> who critiqued the practices of the Communist Party, saw Stalin as a betrayer of the principles of communism, and the Soviet Union as a failed communist state; he provided his analyses in "Notes on Dialectics."<sup>51</sup> This is the basis of the operational gap that is noticeable between Jones and James. There is no indication that they ever collaborated closely in London, though each lent distant support to the other's positions, and their political responses would be similar on some issues; Donald Hinds identifies them as being on the same panel once, in London as a benefit to hurricane victims in the Caribbean, and they are both included in the *Freedomways* 1964 special issue on "The People of the Caribbean Area."

Claudia's visits to both the Soviet Union and China toward the end of her life provide the final elements we can use in an assessment of her communism. It is significant that her visit to the Soviet Union was sponsored by a Soviet women's group. She was clearly impressed by the achievements of women there, and with the history and strength of the Soviet Union that she witnessed there, as well as the excitement, as a communist, of having finally made



it to Russia. She reported back with satisfaction that she had been able to see structures of management and talk with people who were participating in continuing socialist transformation.

Jones seemed, however, more excited about the possibilities opened up by the Chinese Revolution. Her poem “Yenan — Cradle of the Revolution” (see chapter 3) is a critical text in our assessment of her still evolving communism and lifelong practice of learning. Operating fully from a third world position, she uses the poem form to express her admiration for what was happening in China. An allied response would also come from Shirley Graham Du Bois, as reported by Gerald Horne in *Race Woman*. Du Bois, too, was impressed with China and supported its revolutionary programs. Horne notes that “when signs of the rift between Moscow and Beijing first became evident, she was reluctant to take sides and instead, tried to bring the two sides together” (226). Meeting Chairman Mao, as Jones did (with a Latin American delegation) was clearly a high point in Claudia’s life as a communist,<sup>52</sup> as was her interview with some of the leading women in the Chinese Revolution.

Jones’s article about that meeting, “First Lady of the World: I Talk with Mme Sun Yat-sen,” begins with an amplification of the bold claim in her title: “Madame Soon-Ching-Ling, Vice Chairman of the People’s republic of China, and widow of the famed Sun Yat-Sen, President of the First Democratic Republic of China, may properly be termed the First Lady of the World.” The article itself develops a conversation “about the great achievements in Socialist re-construction in the New China based on its policy of Self-Reliance in the field of agriculture and industrialization in light and heavy industry.” Claudia was impressed that Madame Soong Ching Ling was familiar with her imprisonment in the United States and of her work in the *West Indian Gazette* and related Caribbean organizations. The conversation covered a range of issues, from Claudia’s impressions of China to Madame Soong Ching Ling’s speech in Ceylon, which “by its clarity and profundity inspired anti-imperialist fighters enhanced by this confidence in the anti-imperialist, pro peace struggle.” The “peoples’ communes” also occupied a large portion of their conversation, with included details of their development from the early days to the present. Claudia indicates that her travels confirmed “Mme Soong’s confident claim that ‘Peasants have become masters in our own land — not like before. Yes, everywhere the land is luxuriant. We adhere very strongly to our policy of self-reliance for our Socialist Con-

struction.’” In the end, Jones suggests to Madame Soong that anyone seeing the developments there would not consider the “Peoples Communes as having been initiated ‘too swiftly’ for China’s socialist development.”

The trajectory of Jones’s career in London, with its opportunities to direct her activism in new directions, indicates a shift away from a Soviet communist party line toward a third world communist position that celebrated the accomplishment of national revolution. She would debate these issues with her companion, Abhimanyu Manchanda. In a letter to Manchanda dated September 7, 1964, she says, for example:

I had just returned from a few days ago from the great industrial north — east in Shenyang and Anchan — one of the heavy industrial bases of the People’s republic. It’s an exciting experience to visit and meet, learn and observe the numerous innovations in China’s heavy industry, metal and machine tool plants and to visit my second People’s Commune. How much clearer I understood the rather complex (no sense of political emphasis) inter-relations of agriculture and industry. But we (peace delegates to Tokyo 10th world conference) had benefited from a splendid lecture earlier by a brilliant economics professor who also is vice chairman for the promotion of foreign trade. After seeing some light and heavy industry and then another People’s Communes the questions thoroughly explored and answered, asked by me and others present — came to life as one saw under hot sun, the acres of green fields, rice, tall sorghum, corn and other harvests to come. Best of all was interviewing the families — at random.<sup>53</sup>

The path taken by Maoist China would fundamentally challenge the Soviet logic of evolutionary steps toward communism. Claudia would see in China a national revolution rooted in the people, in particular the peasantry. So, she writes excitedly about these visits to Manchanda. Unfortunately, because she dies relatively soon after these trips, we never see an unfolding of her new understandings of these different approaches in communism.

This experience in China contrasts greatly with an earlier letter from the Soviet Union, dated August 21, 1962. While she was excited about being in the Soviet Union, where she was hospitalized briefly, and talked about how impressed she is with women’s roles in the Soviet Union, the letter deals largely with her concerns about the *West Indian Gazette* and its operations. She indicates, though, that she was well taken care of and spoke about Yalta.

Her poem “Paean to the Crimea” written October 11, 1962, from Russia Sanatorium is much more sober and reflective

In which earth's crust were your depths probed  
To fill your breasts with blue-green seas  
That tough the shores of ancient lands  
And is milieu for echoing changes,  
Of peans of praise to you, Crimea.  
And to your people's system-rare

Jones was obviously writing this while hospitalized. Still, in no way does it carry the obvious excitement that subsequently comes through about her experiences in China, and especially in her poem to Yen-an, which is much more optimistic in tone.

Much of her attention in this time, and therefore her expressions of her communism, was focused on her application of these positions to an understanding of British and U.S. imperialism. Communism was the means by which she could advance her anti-imperialist and internationalist work. A beautiful and happy photograph of Jones amidst a group of Chinese children was used as her holiday greeting card that December. And at her death, wreaths and statements from China, the Soviet Union, Cuba, a range of African and Caribbean countries, and a variety of organizations worldwide testified to her numerous connections.<sup>54</sup> A parallel memorial ceremony was offered for her in China, as well, after her passing.



Claudia visits China as guest of China Peace Committee where she meets Chairman Mao and interviews Mme Soon Ching Ling, wife of Sun-Yat Sen, on China's National Day, October 1, 1964.