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**From Dr. Du Bois to Brother Baraka:
Maoism and United States Black Liberation Movements**

David Adams¹

“I wish to take this opportunity to express our resolute support for the American Negroes in their struggle against racial discrimination and for freedom and equal rights.”² So declared the leader of the People’s Republic of China and Chairman of the Communist Party of China, Mao Zedong, on 8 August 1963, on the eve of the renowned “March on Washington.” The above statement would be reprinted in the *Peking Review* and Black radical newspapers like the *Black Panther*, worlds away. Mao, and the Maoist ideology, did not impact the Black liberation movement through rhetoric alone. Whether implicitly or explicitly, through mere influence or direct encounter, Black Power groups would adopt Maoism (or tenets thereof, with its focus on the Third World and its tempering of the Leninist vanguard party with the so-called mass line) as an imaginative weapon in their struggle for freedom in the United States. Maoism’s focus on the national liberation of oppressed groups that traditional Marxism-Leninism (with its insistence on taking directives from the USSR and the strict nature of the all-powerful vanguard party) had ignored, and a less-rigid and defined implementation allowed for a wide diversity of strategy and tactics. This presented radical groups like the Black Panther Party and the Congress of African Peoples an avenue for struggle separated from (and often opposed to) both traditional Marxist-Leninist movements such as the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) (and its non-Maoist “anti-revisionist” split-offs), the liberal strains of the Civil Rights movement within organizations like the National Organization for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). With Maoism as their ideological weapon, Black liberation groups could analyze their material situation and implement tactics without dogmatic restrictions or control by a foreign state (as the Comintern and Communist Party of the Soviet Union had done with the CPUSA), as they maintained clear ideological consistency and goals. They could find solidarity with a movement that emphasized their agency as an oppressed people; frequently, radical Black liberation organizations would interact with and find support from Mao Zedong himself.

One of the Black radical movement’s first encounters with Maoism, or at least Mao Zedong, was with the arguable father of the African-American radical movement W. E. B. Du Bois’ visits to China in 1936 and 1959. Perhaps in a parallel to the future radicals’ opposition to it, Du Bois had resigned from his position with the NAACP in 1934 in protest of the Board of Directors. They had “forbade all criticism of the officers and policies” in *The Crisis*, the magazine Du Bois founded and

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² Mao Tse-tung, “Statement Supporting the American Negroes In Their Just Struggle Against Racial Discrimination by U.S. Imperialism,” *Peking Review*, Marxists Internet Archive, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1966/PR1966-33h.htm>.

edited for decades.³ His resignation signaled his break with the traditional Civil Rights movement he had helped to form and his shift to an even more radical form of thought and activism.

Du Bois first visited China in 1936, where he spoke to the “Chinese Banker’s Club,” imploring them to use their capital and power to throw off the yoke of European imperialism. No other politics were discussed aside from “hatred of Japan for its betrayal of Asia.”⁴ In 1956, Du Bois was “officially invited” to the People’s Republic of China. He was initially denied permission to travel by the U.S. government. His visit was believed to be of ambiguous legality due to the PRC’s involvement in the ongoing Korean War.⁵ He met personally with Mao for four hours and toured several cities and landmarks in the country. Du Bois marveled at the progress made with industry and social inequality yet still acknowledged that “China is no utopia.”⁶

It was his visit to China, among other nations of the Eastern Bloc, that Du Bois cited his application for membership in the CPUSA shortly before he left for the African nation of Ghana at the invitation of its pan-Africanist and Marxist leader, Kwame Nkrumah.⁷ In 1956, he went even further, declaring that “When at last Africa is emancipated the credit should go in no little degree to the influence of Lenin, Stalin and Mao Tse-tung on the thoughts of men.”⁸ Here Du Bois highlights the already-widening gap between traditional Marxism-Leninism and Marxism-inspired Black radicalism. It reveals that Stalin had been denounced in Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” three years earlier. In contrast, the Sino-Soviet split and the development of Maoism as a reaction to the “revisionism” of the post-Stalin Communist Party of the Soviet Union had not yet occurred. Even before “Maoism” or “Mao Zedong Thought” was exported to the international Communist stage, Du Bois recognized Mao’s thought and influence as a qualitative leap in Marxist ideology. Unfortunately, Du Bois would not live to see the advent of Maoism as a formalized ideology in a form broken from Soviet Marxism-Leninism, nor give his insight into it. After six decades of organizing as a Black radical, yet less than three years as a member of a Communist Party, Du Bois would pass away a day before the March on Washington as a citizen and resident of Ghana.

However, before Du Bois was a member of the CPUSA, there was already a strong current of Black liberation within the party. After all, the CPUSA and the American branch of the Communist International’s International Red Aid, the International Labor Defense, took up the infamous Scottsboro Case and hired the renowned Samuel Leibowitz as their lawyer.⁹ However, perhaps the

³ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Dr. DuBois Resigns,” in *Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: The Library of America, 1986), 1260.

⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 45-46.

⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 47.

⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 48-53.

⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois, Volume III: Selections, 1944-1963*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978), 439.

⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Colonialism and the Russian Revolution,” in *Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois in Periodicals Edited by Others, Volume IV: 1945-1961*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, NY: Krauss-Thomson Organization, 1982), 276.

⁹ Gwen Moore, “International Labor Defense (ILD),” in *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression*, ed. Robert S. McElvaine (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 1:516-517.

greatest nucleus of the Black radical movement in the CPUSA lay in Harry Haywood, a chief Marxist-Leninist theoretician within the party. He served on the Central Committee and Politburo. Haywood joined CPUSA in 1925 and traveled to the Soviet Union, and lived there as a student for four years. While there, he made contact with members of other oppressed racial groups such as Manabendra Nath Roy from British-controlled India, Tan Malaka from Dutch-controlled Indonesia, and even Ho Chi Minh from French-controlled Vietnam.¹⁰ Haywood returned to the United States in 1930. He began to agitate for a new “bourgeois revolution” for Black people in the United States, arguing that the work of the revolutionary Reconstruction post-Civil War, a “bourgeois-democratic revolution” according to Haywood’s theory, was unfinished. Hayward, using Lenin’s *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination* and Stalin’s *Marxism and the National Question*, two seminal Marxist-Leninist essays dealing with national self-determination, argued that much of the Southern United States was comprised of majority African-American areas that can be conceived of as distinct nation termed the “Black Belt Republic.” He called for autonomy and the right to self-determination and secession from the United States if the region so desired.¹¹ Haywood’s theory was the official position of the CPUSA until 1934. At that point, critics began to doubt the “economic” origins of racial oppression, a view that Haywood vigorously debated within the party. When William Z. Foster, a former ally of Haywood’s, became Chairman of the CPUSA, Haywood found himself on the party’s left wing as Foster drove the party underground rather than face McCarthyism head-on.¹²

This was likely one of the first breaks from traditional Marxism-Leninism and toward Maoism for the CPUSA’s left-wing. The “correct” action, from a Maoist perspective, would not have been to drive the party underground in a non-deadly situation of repression but to instead stir the masses in favor of traditional “bourgeois-democratic” principles against the repression. The backdrop of the Korean War could have potentially harnessed an anti-war sentiment to back this struggle. Instead, Foster closed party offices, cut contact with mass organizations, dissolved the Southern region of the party in its entirety, and permanently lost the Party thousands of members. However, Haywood could not effectively lead a left-wing, or Maoist-inspired, resistance to these erroneous policies. Rumors spread while he was in France in 1950 that he was a spy from an unspecified organization. The Communist Party of France insisted they had originated from “reliable sources” in the CPUSA.¹³ While these rumors were never substantiated or proven, they severely damaged Haywood’s credibility and organizational capacity, even in the international Communist scene outside of the United States. Haywood could not organize effectively against a campaign against “rightism” in the party while reformists began to fill the ranks of the national office. He was eventually expelled from the CPUSA after 36 years of membership.¹⁴

¹⁰ Thaddeus Russell, “Haywood, Harry,” in *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*, ed. Colin A. Palmer (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), 3:1030-1031.

¹¹ Harry Haywood, *Negro Liberation* (New York: International Publishers, 1948).

¹² Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago, IL: Liberator Press, 1978), 585-586.

¹³ Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 579-582.

¹⁴ Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 586-624.

Haywood left the traditional Marxist-Leninist movement after his expulsion from the CPUSA. He was involved in the Maoist “New Communist Movement” that attempted to recreate the mass movements that the CPUSA had once held. For Haywood, Maoism represented a new era of Marxist theory and practice due to its,

emphasis on testing ideas in practice, care and flexibility in applying united front tactics, of relying upon and serving the people, realism in dealing with power relationships, respect for the integrity of national minorities and the rights of the third world nations against great nation chauvinism, the concrete analysis and application of Marxist-Leninist principles to one’s own country, and the pursuing of the two-line political struggle in the Party.¹⁵

These aspects of Maoism, a break with dogmatism, a focus on the so-called “mass line,” and the emphasis upon the agency and independence of third world nations in resisting imperialism and neo-colonialism appealed so much to the Black radical movement.

Before speaking of the Black Panthers, whose Maoist influence is well-known and documented, one must speak of Robert F. Williams. Williams joined the NAACP in 1945, after serving the U.S. Armed Forces as a Marine, and was elected President of the Union County chapter of the NAACP in Monroe, North Carolina, in the 1950s.¹⁶ There he established a branch of the National Rifle Association known as the “Black Armed Guard” and committed acts of self-defense against the local KKK that led to it being banned. He also wrote the controversial tract, *Negroes with Guns*, that detailed the struggles and successes of his gun-toting NAACP chapter.¹⁷ Williams’ radical attitudes led to his suspension from the NAACP and undue and distorted criticism from *The New York Times* and Martin Luther King, Jr. He was falsely charged with kidnapping a white couple after shielding them from an angry crowd during the famous “Freedom Rides.”¹⁸ In 1961, the Williamses (including their two sons) fled to Cuba as political refugees for five years and then to China, where they stayed three years.¹⁹ In response to an appeal from Robert Williams to many international figures, Mao gave his “Statement Supporting the American Negroes” and organized a rally of “more than ten thousand Chinese” who supported the statement and Williams’ struggle.²⁰ Williams was invited to participate in the PRC’s National Day festivities in 1963 and permitted to go as a representative of Cuba by Fidel Castro. A year later, he returned for the same occasion and toured the PRC, of which a documentary was created.²¹ After the disillusionment of race relations in Cuba and the intensification of the Sino-Soviet split that saw Cuba side with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the Williams family moved to Beijing. There Williams was described as a “foreign friend” who supported the Great

¹⁵ Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 643.

¹⁶ Robeson Taj P. Frasier, “Thunder in the East: China, Exiled Crusaders, and the Unevenness of Black Internationalism,” *American Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (December 2011): 932, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41412799>.

¹⁷ Frasier, “Thunder in the East,” 932.

¹⁸ Frasier, “Thunder in the East,” 933.

¹⁹ Frasier, “Thunder in the East,” 933.

²⁰ Frasier, “Thunder in the East,” 934.

²¹ Frasier, “Thunder in the East,” 935-937.

Proletarian Cultural Revolution. He was allowed to broadcast political radio shows into Africa and was given increased state support for his publication *The Crusader*, which increased its distribution from the 15,000 copies per month they had in Havana to 40-50,000 per their “convenience.”²² The growing influence of Maoism on Black liberation movements in the United States, aided by the Williamses, reportedly led one Black man on the streets of Harlem to exclaim, “Fuck it man, I’m for Mao.”²³ Williams supported the Cultural Revolution fervently. He saw it as a material manifestation of the mass line, a massive increase in workers’ political participation in everyday affairs, unlike anything he had ever seen in the Jim Crow South.²⁴ While Williams eventually distanced himself from such a radical evaluation of the Cultural Revolution, he later acknowledged that racism was a widespread problem in China. He believed that attitudes in China were actively changing, stimulated by socialist values and the egalitarian rhetoric of Maoism. In short, he believed that the Chinese had not overcome racism, but Maoism was defeating it.

Perhaps the greatest influence of Robert F. Williams was not on the African nations that his radio shows broadcast to or through the circulation of his state-supported paper, but on a pair of young students in the Bay Area of California. There, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, inspired by Williams’ *Negroes with Guns*, founded the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP). Newton and Seale both attended Merritt College in Oakland, California, where they met and decided to form the party in 1966, with Newton as “defense minister” and Seale as chairman.²⁵ Williams was not the only ideological influence on the BPP. The selling of copies of the *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* at the University of California, Berkeley had provided the BPP with the funding used to buy two shotguns.²⁶ Ideologically, the BPP represented a variety of influences and ideas: traditional Marxist influences from Marx, Engels, and Lenin. The influence of Maoism in Mao himself and various Black theorists like Kwame Nkrumah and Frantz Fanon, alongside BPP members like Huey P. Newton and Fred Hampton themselves.

In his pamphlet, *On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party*, Eldridge Cleaver lays the basis of the BPP ideology: it was a variation of Marxism-Leninism adapted to the peculiar conditions of the United States, seeking to utilize the lumpenproletariat as the revolutionary class to overthrow capitalism.²⁷ While this is no tenet of Maoism, Cleaver’s willingness to apply a unique analysis of classes in the United States’ particular situation is reminiscent of Mao’s *Analysis of Classes in Chinese Society*. Huey P. Newton’s theory of “intercommunalism” is much more easily identified with Maoist ideology.

²² Frasier, “Thunder in the East,” 940.

²³ Frasier, “Thunder in the East,” 941.

²⁴ Frasier, “Thunder in the East,” 945.

²⁵ “What Ever Happened to Black Panther Bobby Seale?,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 52 (Winter 2006/2007): 38, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25073579>.

²⁶ Andrew M. Fearnley, “The Black Panther Party’s Publishing Strategies and the Financial Underpinnings of Activism, 1968-1975,” *The Historical Journal* 62, no. 1 (2019): 199, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X18000201>.

²⁷ Eldridge Cleaver, *On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party* (Black Panther Party, 1969), 3-5, <https://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/Black%20Liberation%20Disk/Black%20Power!/SugahData/Books/Cleaver.S.pdf>.

Newton's theory was formulated in opposition to traditional conceptions of proletarian internationalism. Newton believed that "nations" in the Marxist sense of the word did not apply to the United States. Instead, he believed that the United States was formed of "communities" dominated by the American "empire."²⁸ Thus, Newton proposed a revolutionary coalition of these communities led by respective vanguard parties. This proposal was nothing new. During the Second World War, the traditionally Marxist-Leninist Comintern led by Stalin had instituted a "United Front" policy wherein the communist parties were ordered to work with social-democratic and non-communist anti-fascist organizations. Mao extended this concept and made the United Front a vital policy of the Chinese Communist Party, allowing the participation of anti-Kuomintang "democratic parties" in the "Political Consultative Conference" and formalized the policy into the structure of the People's Republic of China.²⁹ Newton brought this policy to the United States, where it had been carried out somewhat successfully even before formalizing his theory. Fred Hampton had organized the original "Rainbow Coalition" in Chicago, made up of the Black Panthers, the Young Patriots Organization formed from white southerners, the Puerto Rican Young Lords Party, the Students for a Democratic Society, the Chicano Brown Berets, the American Indian Movement, and the Chinese-American (and Maoist) Red Guard Party.³⁰ Hampton had been recruited to the Black Panther Party after working with the NAACP from the age of sixteen. After being drugged by a police informant, he was assassinated in a surprise police attack while he slept beside his wife on the morning of 4 December 1969. He was only 21 years old.³¹ While the Black Panther Party would fall to factional struggles, FBI counterintelligence persecution, and state repression, another Black organization would also adopt Maoism as the guide for the Black liberation struggle.

In the 1970s, famed Black nationalist and poet Amiri Baraka became involved with an organization known as the "Congress of African People." This organization was founded as a Black cultural nationalist group, unsurprising considering Baraka's promotion of the "Black Arts" movement since the mid-1960s. In 1972, the principal organizer of the National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana, received over 2,500 delegates from all over the United States. However, by 1975, the CAP had become an explicitly Maoist organization.³² The CAP differed from earlier organizations in that it explicitly adopted "Marxist-Leninist-Mao Tse-Tung Thought" when it became

²⁸ Huey P. Newton, "Huey Newton introduces Revolutionary Intercommunalism," libcom.org, <https://libcom.org/library/huey-newton-introduces-revolutionary-intercommunalism-boston-college-november-18-1970>.

²⁹ Mao Tse-tung, "Address to the Preparatory Meeting of the New Political Consultative Conference," Marxists Internet Archive, accessed 31 March 2021, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4_64.htm.

³⁰ Jeb Aram Middlebrook, "Organization a Rainbow Coalition of Revolutionary Solidarity," *Journal of African-American Studies* 23, no. 4 (November 2019): 406, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-019-09454-6>.

³¹ Craig McPherson, "You Can't Kill Chairman Fred: Examining the Life and Legacy of a Revolutionary," *Journal of African American Studies* 23, no. 4 (2019): 277-286, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-019-09436-8>.

³² Robeson Taj P. Frasier, "'The Congress of African People: Baraka, Brother Mao, and the Year of '74,'" *Souls* 8, no. 3 (2006): 144-145, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999940600882947>.

the “Revolutionary Communist League (Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought)” in 1974. Former allies heavily criticized Baraka and non-Marxist Black nationalists for shifting from Black nationalist thought to Maoism. These critics argued that he had become detached from the Black way of life and was no longer “one of the people.”³³ Baraka used traditional Marxist analysis to critique Black nationalist thought that refused to meld with Marxism, arguing that it was a middle-class movement while praising those strains that melded with Marxist thought as the “antithesis to white [supremacy].”³⁴ However, the CAP adopted Maoism and morphed into the Revolutionary Communist League (M-L-M) at an inopportune time. Mao’s political retreat in the mid-1970s empowered so-called “capitalist roaders” such as Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yun. This was reflected in radical (or perhaps anti-radical) changes in China’s foreign policy. For example, when Nixon made his famous visit to China, the People’s Republic normalized foreign relations with Zaire’s pro-Western and capitalist-aligned dictator (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), President Mobutu Sese Seko. The Chinese government supported the pro-Western, anti-communist National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) in the Angolan Civil War against the pro-Soviet People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). This pragmatic foreign policy may have strengthened ties between the United States and China. However, it wrought disastrous consequences on the credibility of China as a world leader in the eyes of Third World liberation movements and Maoist organizations, Black liberation organizations in the United States included. After Mao’s death, this course was not only strengthened but became the only course as Hua Guofeng proved a weak leader in the face of the CCP’s reformist faction and fell to Deng Xiaoping, who abandoned rhetoric around class struggle and the Three-Worlds Theory that had galvanized so many African-Americans and Black liberation movements to embrace Maoism.³⁵ In the end, Baraka abandoned Maoism as a formal ideology yet continued to cite Mao “as an example for Black intellectuals and radicals,” referring them to Mao’s works on the ‘Yenan Forum.’³⁶

Perhaps unsurprisingly, considering the failure of Marxist thought (or any radical political ideology) to ever sustain mass political support in the United States, “Mao Zedong Thought” in the Black liberation movement never found an extensive base. W. E. B. Du Bois emigrated to Ghana just days after applying for membership in the CPUSA, fulfilling his Pan-African dream for himself but abandoning the movement in the United States. After his expulsion from the CPUSA, Harry Haywood tried to organize within the New Communist Movement and its various Maoist sects. However, it was wrought with such petty ideological disputes and organizational fragmentation that a sustained base of support was never possible. Robert F. Williams could never truly embed his Maoist ideas into any organization, returning to the United States in 1969 and living a quiet, non-radical life after the charges against him were dropped in 1975. Perhaps the Black Panther Party had the most authentic mass base of both ideological and organizational support, a vanguard party with mass organizations and programs affecting the lives of ordinary people mobilized under it. However, it too was wrought with factional struggle, police repression, and state interference; the weight of these contradictions came

³³ Frasier, “The Congress of African People,” 150.

³⁴ Frasier, “The Congress of African People,” 151.

³⁵ Frasier, “The Congress of African People,” 153.

³⁶ Frasier, “The Congress of African People,” 153.

crashing down with the deaths of its leaders and the complete collapse of the organization by 1982. One could argue that the Congress of African People, which became the Revolutionary Communist League, *lost* the mass appeal and credibility it had spent years building once it adopted Maoism. Black nationalists began to criticize the adoption of Maoism. They became disillusioned with the stagnation of Maoism under Hua Guofeng, the repression of the Maoist “Gang of Four,” and the complete demise of Maoist ideology in favor of “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” under Deng Xiaoping.

Thus, Maoism has had a long and tumultuous history with the Black liberation movements in the United States; many African-Americans found inspiration and guidance from Mao and his thought, yet many were disappointed by the ultimate lack of progress. Starting with the famed and celebrated W. E. B. Du Bois, African-American radicals, were among the first to recognize the qualitative differences between traditional Marxism-Leninism and the embryonic “Mao Zedong Thought.” However, when Maoism was formalized, African-American radicals rushed to it as a bastion of third-world liberation and independence from the liberal Civil Rights movement and the white-dominated (and perceived anti-Black) traditional Marxism-Leninism of the CPUSA. The split between traditional Black political ideologies and Maoism often caused trouble for Maoist Black radicals. This was illustrated by Robert F. Williams’ moving from Cuba to China and was seen with Baraka in his ideological conflict with the traditional Black nationalists who had followed him since the organization’s founding in 1966. While Maoism and Black liberation movements have been on the decline since the 1970s and Deng Xiaoping’s abandonment of Maoism (as well as the fall of the Eastern Bloc itself), Mao and Maoism remain inspirational in the minds of many African-American radicals. This is especially so for those influenced by the Black radicals of the New Communist Movement, the Black Panther Party, and the Congress of African People.