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Communism as an Americanism: The Curious Case of the Red Jeffersonians

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“The foundation of the Jeffersonian concept of democracy was agrarian, the democracy of farmers owning the land they cultivate and entirely subordinating the other classes within the nation. This was at once the strength and the weakness of Jeffersonian democracy; its strength because it created the indispensable conditions for the mastering of a virgin continent and the realization of American nationhood, its weakness because in the process of development it destroyed its own economic foundation by giving birth to modern industry with its subordination of the independent farmer, who - to Jefferson - was the prime bearer of democracy.”¹ The American communist Earl Browder made this statement in 1943 at an event commemorating the bicentennial of Thomas Jefferson’s birth held at the New York Workers’ School. Eventually falling out with the Communist Party USA, Browder was nevertheless a staunch partisan during his time with the organization. Something of a Stalinist hardliner, Browder was a steadfast defender of the October Revolution and the Stalin era USSR. One might not expect a man with these views to have such a fondness for Thomas Jefferson. Jeffersonian democracy and Marxist-Leninist communism certainly seem like strange, possibly incompatible, bedfellows. But this unconventional marriage is not as bizarre as it appears at first glance, and in fact highlights a long history of Marxist appreciation for bourgeois revolutionaries as well as the unique history of the United States.

From its inception, the United States held a robust agrarian current. For the South in particular, agriculture was core to economic production. The development of large scale, slave based plantation agriculture from America’s colonial days through the first decades of independence consistently clashed with Northern industrial interests, but also the interests of yeoman farmers. After the Civil War, slavery was abolished and the question of agriculture and

¹ Claude G. Bowers, Earl Browder and Francis Franklin, *The Heritage of Jefferson* (New York: The Workers School, 1943), 33.

land became more important than ever. There was a strong agrarian push in favor of small-scale agricultural production; the famous promise of forty acres and a mule to newly freed slaves comes to mind. This agrarian current spread to the West as well with the Homestead Act. At the same time, forces were quickly moving against these small farmers. The legacy of plantation agriculture loomed heavy over the South, with tenancy and absentee land ownership crushing the yeoman ideal. Many farmers financed their ventures based on the crop-lien system, which required them to guarantee crops to merchants in exchange for credit.² Heavily indebted farmers became commonplace due to this system, with one farmer, Ned Cobb, opining, "...the farmer 'finds hanging over him a debt which he cannot pay. The second year he tries again to free himself, but in addition to the burden of the second year, he finds the first year's debt saddled on to him and thus from year to year many of them struggle.'"³ Out West, the advent of massive agribusiness relegated farmers to downtrodden cogs in an elaborate agricultural machine. As stated by Cletus E. Daniel, "If farming on a small scale discouraged the growth of rigid class divisions between farmers and their hired laborers, the social and psychological climate on the large-scale commercial farm promoted impenetrable class and caste lines."⁴

The farmworkers felt as though they were losing control of their lives. With the growth of the country came a need for rapid industrialization, including the industrialization of the agricultural sector. David B. Danbom notes this, highlighting the social movement, which he refers to as Country Lifers, that demanded industrial change come to the inefficient, antiquarian countryside.⁵ Industrial America required an industrial agricultural base, which led to conflict

² Samuel P. Hays, *The Response to Industrialism 1885-1914* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 125.

³ Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 161.

⁴ Cletus E. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers 1870-1941* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1981), 17.

⁵ David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1979), 75.

between farmworkers and outsiders. These farmers already felt they did not hold ownership over their own existence, and now industrialization was being forced upon them from the top down. In the late 19th century, many farmers became involved in the Populist Movement in order to fight back against these infractions. Samuel P. Hayes observed, “Southern agrarians became restless and resentful toward the rising cities, expanding industry...Suspicious of urban areas from which pleas for industrialization emanated, frustrated because of their own relative lack of progress, southern agricultural regions often fought legislation intended to foster industrial growth.”⁶ This anger endeared Jefferson and his thought to farmers of the period.

Farmworkers saw industrialization as a process being forced onto them by a powerful oppressor, and what otherwise may have been viewed as beneficial, time-saving advancements were instead perceived as instruments meant to further advance the domination of capital. James Branscome, arguing that the relationship between Appalachia and the broader United States constitutes a form of internal colonialism, draws from Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* to emphasize the importance of control: “What on the surface may [appear] as ignorance, that keeps people from taking polio shots even when they are offered free transportation, may, in fact, be better explained by...Fanon...who argues...that the Algerians resisted ‘modern medical techniques’ as long as the French were in control of them but adopted the new practices immediately when they felt themselves to be in control.”⁷ Fanon himself reiterated the point of control in *A Dying Colonialism*:

When the discipline considered concerns man’s health, when it’s very principle is to ease pain, it is clear that no negative reaction can be justified. But the colonial situation is precisely such that it drives the colonized to appraise all the colonizer’s contributions in a pejorative and absolute way. The colonized perceives the doctor, the engineer, the schoolteacher, the policeman, the rural constable, through the haze of an almost organic

⁶ Hays, *The Response to Industrialism 1885-1914*, 125.

⁷ Helen Lewis, Linda Johnson and Donald Askins, *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case* (Boone: The Appalachian Consortium Press, 1978), 222-223.

confusion. The compulsory visit by the doctor...is preceded by the assembling of the population through the agency of the police authorities. The doctor who arrives in this atmosphere of general constraint is never a native doctor but always a doctor belonging to the dominant society...

The statistics on sanitary improvements are not interpreted by the native as progress in the fight against illness, in general, but as fresh proof of the extension of the occupier's hold on the country.⁸

This phenomena is doubly true in the case of agricultural industrialization, as its main purpose was directly economic. Especially black farmers, who still carried the legacy of slavery with them while also facing brutal racism and segregation, must have been even more suspicious of these white outsiders. This also helps to better rationalize the seeming contradiction between communists like Browder's simultaneous support for Jeffersonian agrarianism in the United States and Stalinist collectivization in the Soviet Union. Browder saw the Soviet Union as a true proletarian democracy, meaning agricultural industrialization in that context represented the Russian peasant taking control over their own destiny, as opposed to being further assimilated into the capitalist machine. As Branscome noted, "I have seen parents who had refused to have their children vaccinated at the public health clinic willingly have them vaccinated when it was 'our' medical students who were giving the shots."⁹ For Browder and others, the newly industrialized Russian agricultural workers were giving the shots. Their American counterparts were not.

The rugged agrarian-centered individualism of the Jeffersonian ideal grew in popularity among aggravated farmers during the rise of industrialism in the early 1900s. A strong Jeffersonian spirit persisted, this despite collective forms of organization and a strong socialist current within the agrarian movement. Norman Pollack highlighted the sense of solidarity shared between farmers and urban industrial workers in the Populist Movement during the turn of the

⁸ Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 121-122.

⁹ Lewis, *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case*, 223.

century.¹⁰ Many important socialist and communist figures like Eugene V. Debs and William Z. Foster began their careers in labor organizing at this time, and spent their formative years in this ideological milieu. And, due in no small part to the key role of farmers, it was in this milieu that figures like Thomas Jefferson were appreciated. Lawrence Goodwin, speaking of people quoted in speeches, described Jefferson as a, “Populist favorite.”¹¹ The idea that America itself was a nation built from individual farmers living humble frontier lifestyles resonated with those who felt the industrial behemoth was encroaching into their lives. In many instances, the Jeffersonian tendency managed to prevail over the more collectivist tendencies. Garin Burbank, speaking about the Socialist Party of Oklahoma, asks, “Did the imported socialism transform local cultural attitudes toward property, enterprise, and the pursuit of individual success? Or did socialist leaders and activists provide an explanation and a method of organization that strengthened a battered rural morale and inspired farmers to take political action to fulfill long-standing hopes that were rooted in their practice of small-scale capitalism?”¹² Importantly, not all farmers shared the petty bourgeois background that Burbank speaks of; those sharecroppers who did not own the land they worked, many of whom carried with them the experience of involuntary servitude, endured a very different predicament.

To borrow from Marx, a specter haunted America, the specter of slavery, and the scars of the institution permeated black agricultural work. Whites had been able to work as small farmers for centuries before most black Americans were able to do the same, and those centuries certainly made a difference. As slaves, black people had a different relationship to production than white farmers did. The slave did not sell his labor as a commodity in return for a wage; he

¹⁰ Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1966), 44.

¹¹ Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (Oxford; London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 191.

¹² Garin Burbank, “Agrarian Socialism in Saskatchewan and Oklahoma: Short-Run Radicalism, Long-Run Conservatism,” *Agricultural History* 51, no. 1 (1977), 175-176.

himself was sold as a commodity. The commodification of the slave went beyond labor, extending to the body and the life of the person who was owned. The Marxist historian Herbert Aptheker (who had taught at the New York Workers School) summed it up perfectly: “By law, the slave’s submission had to be perfect and the employer’s power absolute, extending to life and limb.”¹³ Slavery represented a distinctive economic structure with its own peculiarities, especially when viewed alongside typical capitalist production. W.E.B. Du Bois noted the nature of slaves as investments on the part of their owner, in a way that white workers simply were not. This meant slave owners had to provide certain basic necessities for their slaves, something that would be unnecessary for wage workers. While some used this to make the claim that slavery was more moral than wage labor, DuBois was quick to dismiss this assertion: “...Negro slaves in America represented the worst and lowest conditions among modern laborers... They represented in a very real sense the ultimate degradation of man. Indeed, the system was so reactionary, so utterly inconsistent with modern progress, that we simply cannot grasp it today. No matter how degraded the factory hand, he is not real estate. The tragedy of the black slave’s position was precisely this; his absolute subjection to the individual will of an owner.”¹⁴ Slaves being an investment certainly did not improve their condition as property, and many times it did not improve their condition period. C.L.R. James stated in *The Black Jacobins*, “The difficulty was that though one could trap them like animals...they remained...human beings; with the intelligence and resentment of human beings. To cow them into the necessary docility and acceptance necessitated a régime of calculated brutality and terrorism, and it is this that explains the unusual spectacle of property-owners apparently careless of preserving their property.”¹⁵

¹³ Herbert Aptheker, *The Colonial Era: A History of the American People* (New York: International Publishers, 1959), 41.

¹⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 9-10.

¹⁵ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 11-12.

Angela Davis elucidated the forms of dehumanization unique to enslaved women, explaining, “Expediency governed the slave-holder’s posture toward female slaves: when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles.”¹⁶ Enslaved women were often treated as little more than livestock, especially after the foreign slave trade ended in the United States, requiring plantation owners to produce new human commodities locally. Charles Sellers highlighted how this relegated female slaves to their status as “breeders,” while also allowing for the growth of a much larger African population in the United States than in Latin America.¹⁷ This was important, as slavery was a key force in the development of capitalism, both globally and within the United States. In spite of this, the slave mode of production eventually stood in the way of capitalism’s further development; as Walter Rodney said, “Slavery is useful for early accumulation of capital, but it is too rigid for industrial development.”¹⁸

The yeoman farmer ideal of Jefferson proves somewhat troublesome when this history is taken into account. In Jefferson’s time, the black farmer could not conceivably achieve this ideal. While Jefferson’s ideal centered the small farmer, his actual governance often served to benefit large scale plantation agriculture. On top of that, even the small-scale white farmers of the era often owned slaves, sometimes buying them without first having the resources to even feed them.¹⁹ Even after emancipation, black farmers were not on equal footing with white farmers. Not only did the brutal racial attitudes of slavery persist, but the economic effects of slavery

¹⁶ Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 6.

¹⁷ Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 398.

¹⁸ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1981), 87.

¹⁹ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 8.

lingered as well. The communist Harry Haywood noticed this, referring to Southern sugar plantation work as “semi-feudal” and stating:

While sharecropping is the form of tenure with the most pronounced feudal-slave characteristics, semi-slave forms of exploitation are not confined to that category. In fact, all categories of Negroes in Southern agriculture are conditioned, either directly or indirectly, by the social remnants of slavery which had long since been adapted to the needs of monopoly capitalism. The shadow of the plantation prescribes strict limits for the development of the neighboring Negro tenant and owner, keeping him ever at a disadvantage in relation to his white counterpart. As renter, or as owner, he is restricted to inferior land, denied equal commercial and banking services. As regards the “free” laborer, we are not dealing with a free worker in the capitalist sense, but with one who is subject to riding boss supervision, and in many cases, debt and peonage.²⁰

These remnants of the old slave order played a role in the farm labor struggles of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, both in terms of the conditions of black farmers and the tensions between black and white farmers in the labor struggle. In 1931, a sharecroppers’ rebellion in England, Arkansas led communists in rural Alabama to organize Alabama’s rural poor. With the Communist Party’s dedication to racial equality and the predominance of black agricultural labor in the area, though, attempts to unite black and white farmworkers failed to materialize.²¹ Despite these historical facts, the veneration of Jefferson still persisted.

Not all participants in the farmworkers movement were ideologically tied to socialism as a concept, but for those that were, the legacy of Jefferson was just as important. American socialists have always struggled with what to think of America. How does an American socialist reckon with his country’s nature? Until the middle of the 20th century, it was extremely common for American socialists to have a deep admiration for the American experiment. Why, though? Was a man like Thomas Jefferson not a slaver and, in his own time, a hindrance to the further development of capitalism? And why was it that Jefferson seemed to garner so much praise

²⁰ Harry Haywood, *Selected Works of Harry Haywood* (2022), 138-139.

²¹ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 38-39.

among communists who were not themselves farmers? It would be unwise to assume that this admiration came solely as a spillover from the attitudes of disgruntled agrarians. Other American political figures, Abraham Lincoln being a prime example, also became heroes of the communists. To understand this, a wider context is necessary.

The treatment of early-twentieth century American communists toward figures like Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln was not out of place when viewed next to the attitudes of foreign communists and socialists toward their national heroes. Examples range from Chinese communists' admiration for Sun Yat-Sen to Cuban revolutionaries' adoption of Jose Martí as a forefather to their movement. Certain communist guerrilla movements in Latin America evoked the names of famous revolutionaries of the past, like the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement in Peru and the Manuel Rodriguez Patriotic Front in Chile. Just as American communists saw Jefferson and Lincoln as the ideological progenitors of their movement, so too did the Sandinistas of Nicaragua view their namesake, Augusto Cesar Sandino. In a 1980 interview with Marta Harnecker, commander in chief of the Sandinista People's Army Humberto Ortega explains Sandino's importance to their movement: "...Sandino assimilated the most revolutionary ideas of his time and was able to integrate them into our historical process. He...included a number of political, ideological, anti-imperialist, internationalist, and military facets...the struggle Sandino carried out...left us with a number of historical and programmatic elements and revolutionary views which we assimilated."²²

This parallel also applied to the idea that the legacies of heroes of the American working class had been stolen away from the workers and held hostage by the ruling elite. In his 1936 work *Lincoln and the Communists*, Earl Browder stated, "The reactionary Republican Party of

²² Tomas Borge, Carlos Fonseca, Daniel Ortega, Humberto Ortega, and Jaime Wheelock, *Sandinistas Speak: Speeches, Writings, and Interviews with Leaders of Nicaragua's Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1982), 53.

today still attempts to exploit the name of Lincoln,” and went on to declare, “If the tradition of Lincoln is to survive, if his words shall play a role in political life today, this will be due not to the Republicans nor to the Democrats, but to the modern representatives of historical progress, the Communists. Today, it is left to the Communist Party to revive the words of Lincoln.”²³

Making a similar argument, Hugo Chavez rejoiced in knowing that his movement in Venezuela returned ownership of Simón Bolívar to the people. Responding to journalist Marta Harnecker, Chavez stated, “In two hundred years of Venezuelan history, the people have never felt such a sense of ownership over a constitution. This is an unbelievably important step in the revolutionary process, and not only ideologically, but also in that we have been able to plant the Bolivarian concept in the soul of the people to such an extent that the oligarchy that used to call itself Bolivarian no longer wants to be associated with Bolívar. They had hijacked Bolívar and now he is back with the people.”²⁴ William Z. Foster, a giant in the early Communist Party USA, reiterated this same concept when Earl Browder was under arrest by the American state: “The tradition of Jefferson, Tom Paine, Lincoln, John Brown, Eugene Debs has never been in the hands of the jailers. Today it is in the hands of Earl Browder, the prisoner.”²⁵ The Marxist understanding of history as an ongoing, dialectical process allowed socialists of all stripes to recuperate all manner of non-Marxist figures as progressive champions on the path toward communism.

One potential issue with the above comparisons is that the figures adopted by many third world revolutionaries were much more obviously progressive than those adopted by their American counterparts, particularly Thomas Jefferson. The fact still remains that Jefferson was a

²³ Earl Browder, *Lincoln and the Communists* (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1936), 5.

²⁴ Chesa Boudin, *Understanding the Venezuelan Revolution: Hugo Chavez Talks to Marta Harnecker* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2005), 106.

²⁵ William Z. Foster, “Earl Browder Remains the Heroic Leader of the People,” Marxist Internet Archive, March, 1941. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/foster/1941/browder-heroic.pdf>, 196.

slave owner, and despite certain statements gesturing toward an anti-slavery position, he ultimately chose to preserve the institution. This is in sharp contrast to Bolívar, for example, who once railed against slavery, announcing:

Slavery is the violation of every law. The law that would seek to preserve it would be sacrilege. What possible justification can there be for its perpetuation? From whatever perspective you consider this crime, I cannot persuade myself that any Bolivian could be depraved enough to want to legitimize this most abominable violation of human dignity. One man owned by another! A man regarded as property! One of God's images hitched to the yoke like a beast! Let someone tell us, where do these usurpers of men file their titles of ownership? They were not sent to us by Guinea, because Africa, devastated by fratricide, can only export crime. The remnants of those warring African tribes having been transplanted here, what law or authority would be capable of sanctioning ownership of these victims? To transmit, prolong, or perpetuate a crime exacerbated by torture would be the most appalling outrage. To base ownership on savage crime would be inconceivable without the total distortion of the law and the absolute perversion of the idea of human obligation. The sacred doctrine of equality must never be violated. Can there be slavery where equality reigns? Such a contradiction would demean not so much our sense of justice as our sense of reason; our notoriety would be based on insanity, not usurpation.²⁶

Bolívar's condemnation of slavery was certainly much more scathing than Jefferson's ever was. It is also important to recall Jefferson's stance on recognition of Haitian independence following the Haitian Revolution. This came at a time when there were currents within the American political establishment who were in favor of developing trade relations with the new republic. Most notably among this group was John Adams, who also took a much more staunch anti-slavery stance than Jefferson did.²⁷ Jefferson, in many ways, was regressive even for his time. Especially when viewed through a Marxist lens, how is it that a representative of Southern plantation agriculture became a symbol for American communists more so than the seemingly more progressive Northern bourgeois class?

²⁶ Frederick H. Fornoff, *El Libertador: Writings of Simón Bolívar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 61-62.

²⁷ Fred Kaplan, *Lincoln and the Abolitionists: John Quincy Adams, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2017), 137.

Somewhat more puzzling is that it is not only American communists who lionized Jefferson. One example of this is Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro, who expressed his admiration for certain American leaders at the UN general assembly in 1960. Explaining that he does not view the people of the United States the same way he views their government, Castro said, “There are many humane North Americans, intellectuals, progressive and courageous writers, in whom I see the nobility of the early leaders of this country, such as Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln.”²⁸ Vietnamese revolutionary Ho Chi Minh expressed this same fondness for Jefferson when he began Vietnam’s Declaration of Independence with an excerpt from the American Declaration of Independence.²⁹ It seems that the Marxist appreciation of Thomas Jefferson went well beyond the shores of the United States of America.

The major contradiction in Jefferson’s life was that he was a revolutionary who stunted the revolution. He wrote the American Declaration of Independence, and played a major role in the war against the British that followed. At the same time, he saw a small-scale, agrarian economy as the best path for the new republic to take. The United States had to develop along capitalist lines before socialism could become possible, and the plantation agriculture that Jefferson advocated held back capital’s potential. Or so it would seem. In Browder’s speech on Jefferson’s 200th birthday, he argues that Jeffersonian agrarianism itself is what allowed American capitalism to reach its uniquely advanced level. Pointing to the colonization of the continent as the deciding factor in capitalism’s development in the United States, Browder draws a direct line from Jefferson’s Louisiana Purchase to Lincoln’s Homestead Act.³⁰ This understanding is not unique among communists of the time, either. Joseph Stalin made a similar analysis when making suggestions on the agrarian question in Russia prior to the Bolshevik

²⁸ Fidel Castro, *Fidel Castro Reader* (Melbourne; New York; London: Ocean Press, 2017), 181.

²⁹ Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Writings (1920-1969)* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2001), 53.

³⁰ Bowers, *The Heritage of Jefferson*, 35.

Revolution. Stalin stated, “The division of the land will call forth the mobilization of property. The Poor will sell their land and take the path of proletarianization; the wealthy will acquire additional land and proceed to improve their methods of cultivation; the rural population will split up into classes; an acute class struggle will flare up, and in this way the foundation for the further development of capitalism will be laid.”³¹ This is not at all dissimilar to Browder’s assertion that Jefferson’s agrarian ideal contained the seeds of its own destruction, thus giving birth to modern industry. Browder saw the Federalists as ultimately a hindering force for American capitalism because of their short-sightedness. Jefferson, said Browder, was the true visionary, intentional or otherwise, of American industrialism.

Herbert Aptheker also assessed Jefferson rather positively, noting in particular his understanding that for freedoms to be secured for the exploited majority, some of those same freedoms must be curbed for the exploiting minority. Aptheker cited the fact that despite Jefferson’s support of concepts like freedom of speech, assembly, and property, he helped to carry out the erasure of civil liberties, confiscation of property, arrest, and even execution of loyalists, many times without trial.³² For Marxists, the state takes on a class character depending on the ruling class of that society. It is the job of this state to secure the interests of the ruling class. For the new American Republic, it was the role of the state to secure bourgeois rule, which Jefferson exercised by suppressing the counter-revolutionary elements of the society, thus ensuring the success of the bourgeois revolution. Aptheker conceded that Jefferson’s understanding of freedom and democracy did not extend to millions of women, enslaved Africans, American Indians, and indentured servants, but affirmed that Jefferson still represented a progressive force for his time, assuring that, “This is not said in any spirit of muckraking, or of

³¹ Joseph Stalin, *The Collected Works of Joseph Stalin, Volume One* (Madison: Iskra Books, 2022), 175.

³² Herbert Aptheker, *The Nature of Democracy, Freedom, and Revolution* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 11.

exposing the clay feet of Jefferson, the idol. No man is to be idolized; but if one were forced to select an idol among human beings, he could not do very much better than select Thomas Jefferson.”³³

The idea of recuperating progressive figures is valuable to revisit. It could be argued that the lineage connecting Jefferson to Browder is one of recuperation. The abolitionists and Radical Republicans in the middle of the 19th century had recuperated the image of Jefferson long before the communists even existed. These men saw the abolition of slavery as the next step in the ongoing process of American democracy, and often invoked the founding fathers to get their point across. As Eric Foner put it: “Almost every Republican believed that it had been the intention of the founding fathers to restrict slavery and divorce the federal government from all connection with it. Countless Republicans cited statements by Washington, Jefferson, and others to prove that the founders had been abolitionists.”³⁴ Lincoln himself came to utilize Jefferson’s ghost in his own rhetoric, even drawing inspiration from Andrew Jackson at times.³⁵ This connection was not lost on Earl Browder. In *Lincoln and the Communists*, Browder declared, “At that time [the Civil War], the party of reaction was the Democratic Party, that appealed to the traditions of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson. But it was not the Democratic Party which used the teachings of Jefferson and Jackson, but it was Lincoln and the new party.”³⁶ This recuperation continued with the communists, who, by claiming to be the inheritors of Lincoln, by extension inherited Jefferson and Jackson as well.

Browder and other communists viewed American history through the dialectic. Class contradictions brought on class conflict, which kept the wheel of history moving forward. The

³³ Aptheker, *The Nature of Democracy, Freedom, and Revolution*, 10.

³⁴ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 84.

³⁵ Eric Foner, *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 64.

³⁶ Browder, *Lincoln and the Communists*, 5.

American Revolution, of which Jefferson was an architect, and the Civil War, or Second American Revolution, were both key revolutionary moments on this path. A socialist revolution would represent the completion of the process, and of the ideals of Jefferson and Lincoln. The American communist Harry Haywood noted this process: “The Negro was not freed by the Revolution of 1776, nor was he fully freed by the Second American Revolution of 1861-77,” and, “The glaring ambiguity of a nation half free and half slave was recognized by the most advanced statesmen of the period, by Paine, Jefferson, Franklin, Samuel Adams, and others.”³⁷ The United States, like any other nation, had a unique historical development, and while a Marxist analysis could be used to explain this history, solutions still had to be adapted to that American context. Just as leaders from Mao to Castro attempted to adapt Marxism to their unique national conditions, American communists like Browder, Foster, and Haywood were working to adapt Marxism to American conditions. In his speech at the Workers School, Browder said, “We can truly understand modern America, and find the solutions to its problems, only if we understand how this America came into being. For this understanding, a full knowledge and appreciation of Jefferson and his role are indispensable. Jeffersonianism must be united with Marxism and thus brought to the higher level of historical development that corresponds to the tasks of the twentieth century.”³⁸ Despite being known as party-line hardliners, in this way men like Browder showed novelty and innovation.

For Earl Browder and others, the legacy of Thomas Jefferson was inseparable from any American communist movement, because the communists were the torchbearers of revolution that Jefferson introduced to the country. Jefferson did not have to be a communist himself, nor a perfect man. What he represented in the historical process was enough to make him a figure

³⁷ Harry Haywood, “The Negro Nation,” Marxist Internet Archive, 1948, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/haywood/negro-liberation/ch07.htm>.

³⁸ Bowers, *The Heritage of Jefferson*, 36.

worthy of adoration. As the Marxist scholar Michael Parenti said, “There is nothing sacred about the existing system. All economic and political institutions are contrivances that should serve the interests of the people. When they fail to do so, they should be replaced by something more responsive, more just, and more democratic. Marx said this, and so did Jefferson. It is a revolutionary doctrine, and very much an American one.”³⁹ For these American communists, the American spirit and the Marxist spirit were one and the same, and despite the assertion seeming odd at first glance, they made a compelling case. In February of 1954, William Z. Foster affirmed the value of the New York Workers’ School, where just over a decade earlier Browder had delivered his speech on the day of Jefferson’s birth. Now, though, the school was no longer called the New York Workers’ School. The new name could be seen in the title of Foster’s piece: “The Working Class Needs the Jefferson School.”⁴⁰ Maybe the working class did need the Jefferson school. And maybe the working class needed Jefferson as well.

³⁹ Michael Parenti, *Democracy for the Few* (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008), 306.

⁴⁰ William Z. Foster, “The Working Class Needs the Jefferson School,” Marxist Internet Archive, February, 1954. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/foster/1954/jeff-school.pdf>.

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