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# The Racial Question: The Racial Issue in the United States.

by Claude McKay

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The Negro population of America is estimated at between 12 and 15 millions. About 20% of this number is distributed throughout Northern states; the rest live in the South.

Negro workers of the South may be roughly divided into four sections. In the cities they are (1) stevedores, (2) small factory workers and artisans. In the country they are (3) small farmers and (4) cotton plantation workers. The Southern Negroes are largely unorganized, although of late years there has sprung up some movement for organization among the land workers. The Southern whites are also unorganized except in the old craft and railroad unions. The Negro today is not loyal to any party. From the end of the Civil War until the period of the [Theodore] Roosevelt Administration he was fairly loyal to the Republican party as the party of Lincoln who emancipated the slaves. But he is now disillusioned; he has many great grievances against "white" America, such as Lynching, Disfranchisement and Serfdom in the South and Social and Industrial Discrimination in the North; but in the main he is only race-conscious and rebellious, not revolutionary and class-conscious.

It may even be said that Negroes are anti-socialistic, except for a goodly number of young colored intellectuals who have been forced back into the masses by competition and suppression. Since, however,

America entered the European War, the Negroes have been ripe for revolutionary propaganda. The Garvey, "Back to Africa" movement has swept American Negroes like a storm. Although the mass of them know that they must remain in America, they responded to the emotional appeal as a relief from their sufferings.

But the future of American Negroes whether they become the pawn of the bourgeoisie in its fight against white labor or whether they become class-conscious, depends on the nature of the propaganda that is conducted among them and the tactics adopted towards their special needs. At present the blacks distrust and hate the whites to such an extent that they, the blacks, are very hostile to the radical propaganda of the whites. They are more partial to the humanitarians.

The blacks are hostile to Communism because they regard it as a "white" working-class movement and they consider the white workers their greatest enemy, who draw the color line against them in factory and office and lynch and burn them at the stake for being colored. Only the best and broadest minded Negro leaders who can combine Communist ideas with a deep sympathy for and understanding of the black man's grievances will reach the masses with revolutionary propaganda. There are few such leaders in America today.

*Transcribed by William Maxwell for the Modern American Poetry website.*

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*For further information on Claude McKay and his role, see Dr. Maxwell's book,  
New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism between the Wars.  
(New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).*

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