

Thought Leadership and Women's Liberation Politics: A Book Review of *Left of Karl Marx* by Carol Boyce Davies

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ABSTRACT

Claudia Jones' life and intellectual work have made impactful contributions in several spaces, including Marxist-Leninist ideology and anti-imperialism discourse. This review analyzes *The Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* written by Carol Boyce Davies. Davies offers valuable insight into Jones' anti-imperialist ideas, which are layered as she believed imperialism was the root cause of racism and fascism. Furthermore, Davies draws upon a wide range of Jones' journalistic pieces to highlight the impact she has had in areas like Communist ideology and women's political liberation.



Keywords: *Communism, imperialism, internationalism, liberation, Marxism, wage equality, feminism*

BIO

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Claudia Jones' life, intellectual work, and organizing efforts have shaped history when considering its expansion of Marxist-Leninist ideology and contribution to anti-imperialist discourse. 'The Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones' written by Carol Boyce Davies details her life and career journey, outlining the ways in which Jones navigates through neo-colonial systems as an active Black feminist and communist. The geographical movements and displacements in her life also contributed to her internationalist ideology. Although born in Trinidad, she spent much of her adult life in the United States before being deported to England. Her unique life and observations motivated her to advocate for disenfranchised people in various capacities, and much of her advocacy was done through journalism and community organizing. In this review, I will discuss Jones' notable additions to Marxist theory as it relates to Black people, Women, and other marginalized groups - ultimately arguing that Jones was the first to bring an intersectional approach to Marxist and socialist theory, before 'intersectionality' became widely accepted and well known. Furthermore, I will discuss her approach in combating imperialism, which she suggests is the root cause of racism and division in modern society. Finally, I will discuss why her contributions are frequently overlooked, which I suspect is due to the US government's strategic efforts to paint her as a criminal and deviant.

One of Jones' most notable contributions is her expansion of Marxist theory to show how Black people, and in particular Black women, are disproportionately affected by

capitalist structures and policies. Prior to her time, Marxist theory simply suggested that class exploitation was due to factors including wage differentiation, which unfairly allow monopolists to make unreasonable profits. Since women are a part of the working class, they too are subject to class exploitation, but the exploitation was not seen to be caused by their gender itself. Jones proves that the issue is much deeper than this, where multiple structures work together to oppress groups to varying degrees: capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy. Therefore, one-dimensional analysis of the impact of capitalism isn't sufficient to drive actual change. For example, examining the racial impact of capitalism alone isn't sufficient to create a more equitable society, because although Black men and Black women both experience racism, Black women are oppressed by Black men due to structural conditions of patriarchy.

Her contribution is important because it changes the benchmark of progress within the Marxist-Leninist framework. She explains that advancement can really only occur if Black women, as the "triple oppressed group," can access better living conditions because this would entail dismantling all oppressive structures that drive issues like wealth inequality, power struggles, etc. Jones' approach in demonstrating the need for intersectionality was brilliant due to its logical approach. To demonstrate that the issues within the capitalist society are layered, she dissects the issue by the layer of gender, and then combines race and gender together. As a baseline, Claudia explains that women face exploitation as workers and within the household. In work settings, women face

lower wages and subordination to service positions, and in the household their labor goes unrecognized and uncompensated. Importantly, these are related as since household work is not respected or deemed as real work. The value of work that women do outside the household is simply seen as an extension of this and therefore they aren't paid wages that reflect the output of their labor. Jones then used statistics to demonstrate that Black women are positioned economically at the lowest rank of society - confined to lower paying jobs and given few opportunities to become professionals.

Disproportionate representation in service work led to striking disparities in wages. When considering comparisons between Black women's wages to men's average wages and then white women's wages to the same, it demonstrates the issue as both a racial and gendered problem. The super exploitation of Black women was an issue close to Jones' heart likely because of her family's experience of her mom dying at 37 from strenuous working conditions in a garment industry job. I found the approach she used to prove why the Black woman's problem should be 'everyone's problem' to be an interesting one. She provided the reasoning that since Black women are leaders in their households, improving conditions for them means creating better living conditions for all Black people, and remarkably, society in general benefits from the value of the labor of Black women. I believe Jones introduced the public to the basic premise of intersectionality through her intellectual work provided to the Communist Party of USA, as she introduced them to the concepts and language of 'triple oppression'.

Ultimately, this was an important contribution to Communist ideology because by proving that capitalism, imperialism and sexism create unique conditions for different groups, the need for specific and targeted group-by-group solutions is highlighted.

Jones was firmly rooted in anti-imperialist politics as she found imperialism was the primary driver behind structural issues like racism and fascism. Once again, Jones made interesting contributions to Marxist theory with respect to imperialism and conflict. Marxist theory states that all modern wars are caused by competition for resources and markets controlled by imperial powers, and these wars are a natural consequence of the free market and social stratification systems we operate in. Jones enhanced this theory by writing about war's disproportionate effects on Black and Brown communities, stating that these groups truly bear the brunt of this competition for resources. According to author Boyce Davies, Jones wrote a column in 'Half the World' that identifies how health, food, schooling, and day-to-day survival and general well-being are impacted when the government emphasizes war rather than people. Particular attention is given to the report's findings on black, Mexican, and Puerto Rican families who often lived in poverty. The column ends by saying "Let Woman Today hear from its readers on what you are doing in your community: (1) to demand an end to the wage freeze and for immediate wage increases; (2) for immediate price and rent control; (3) for a cut in taxes of low-incomed people." (Davies, Carole Boyce. *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia*

Jones. (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2008), 81.). Clearly, Jones was interested in the effects of imperialism on particular groups, one of which was Caribbean countries. She defines the US as a covert imperialist where they view the West Indies as a source of advantages, such as food and cheap labor. Given these terms, she advocated for a fully independent Caribbean federation, which was self-governing and safeguarded the rights of vulnerable people such as minority groups. When met with knowledge that made this seem unlikely, she advocated for the islands having labor organizations and unions to protect common workers from the interests of bourgeoisie rulers.

Journalism helped Jones disseminate her anti-imperialist ideas, where she found that political education was key to building the consciousness of oppressed groups. Furthermore, she used writing as a tool to build a joint sense of identity amongst Black people of various geographies, drawing connections between anti-colonial struggles around the world as she saw all fights for liberation as related. Jones brought this internationalist perspective to all platforms she wrote for. For example, she prompted the West Indian Gazette to launch 'solidarity campaigns' with leaders of liberation movements in African and Asian countries. Similarly, she was instrumental in helping Caribbean readers in the UK to redefine their Blackness and separate themselves from 'Britishness', which was meaningful given they were regularly reminded that they were outsiders, as evidenced by the Nottinghill riots occurring in 1958. Whilst tackling British racism was one of the central goals of the West Indian Gazette, Jones also provided

Caribbean UK residents with exposure to Black artists and intellectuals from around the world, creating fertile ground for development of an African consciousness and unifying the Black world. Using the West Indian Gazette, she featured African American artists, interviewed W.E.B Du Bois & Martin Luther King, and facilitated events for British residents that paralleled those of global events. For example, she connected the 'March in Britain' to the one occurring in Washington DC. Jones personally understood the challenge of maintaining identity in migration, as the time at which she moved to the United States marked the initial influx of Caribbean people settling in the US. Like many immigrants, she was immersed in Caribbean culture while living in New York, and from observation she saw that public displays of culture were important to diasporic development and solidarity. She observed the Caribbean Carnival in New York was being resumed post-war as a sister event to Carnival in Trinidad, and it was seen as a means of bridging cultures. Her critique of Carnival in New York influenced her organizing of Carnival in the UK: Jones saw that the event did not foster any relationship to Caribbean and African Americans celebrating it, and it did not help Caribbean migrants adjust to their new environment in any way. Given the Nottinghill riots, Jones made the UK Carnival both symbolic of interracial friendship and the power of Caribbean culture identity, organizing a Caribbean Carnival Committee to help best display aspects of Caribbean culture like steelband music and art/fashion through a Carnival queen competition. Her effort lives on today as the scale of the Carnival grew and the event later became known as the

Notting Hill Carnival, an event which attracts millions of UK residents and foreigners annually.

Her internationalist approach was also evident in her feminist politics, which could easily be observed by looking at her writing for the 'Half the World' column. Jones believed that when women became conscious of their exploitation and once empowered, they were capable of organizing amongst themselves, obtaining power to influence public and political activity that they were previously strategically excluded from. In the column, Jones recommended texts from authors around the world who were pursuing socialism, including books on women in China and the Soviet Union, 'The Woman Question' (which included ideas from Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin), and biographies of influential Black women, including Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. This ideological stance permeated her personal life and relationships too, as she felt connected to other women in leadership with the same liberation ideals for their respective countries. For example, in prison Jones used poetry to communicate solidarity with other feminist activists like the Puerto Rican activist Blanca Canales Torresola, who was fighting for political liberation in Puerto Rico.

In my opinion, one reason why Jones may not be credited properly for her contributions to society and intellectual thought is the US government's criminalization of her image, and consequent damage to her reputation in the international community. Since she publically branded herself as a communist, she was deemed oppositional to the American government from the

beginning as in the eyes of the state, communism and radicalism were synonymous, and advocates for Marxist-Leninism were criminals rather than politically engaged citizens. The FBI strongly believed that people of her political orientation had intention to overthrow the American government, and therefore should be policed and silenced. The texts which formed the basis for her deportation are telling, as they highlight that American society is founded upon values of racism, sexism, and capitalism. Her article 'International Women's Day and the Struggle for Peace' was deemed subversive by the FBI, and her piece 'Women in the Struggle for Peace and Security' led to her arrest as it prompted American women to advocate for peace and end the Korean War, taking up a similar stance to women involved in anti-war and anti-fascism efforts in Latin America, the Soviet Union, Asia, and Africa. Jones was said to be violating the Internal Security Act of 1950, which condemns aliens publishing information that opposes the present government in attempts to overthrow it. This is particularly interesting because Jones was involved in several counter-education efforts, educating people on the true values of communism to reduce stigma. However, her public affiliations to the Communist Party, Black liberation movements, and international feminist movements made her the perfect target for the FBI to incarcerate and deport. This criminalization points to the struggle of Black activists with public political affiliations and ideological stances that differ from the state's ideological orientation.

Works Cited

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