

Claudia Jones, The Person and The Idea

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ABSTRACT

Carol Boyce Davies' influential work, *Left of Karl Marx*, describes the life and time of Claudia Jones, a not very well-known, influential 20th-century Marxist thinker. Through an in-depth look at the trials and tribulations Jones underwent, whether it be her time in prison or her deportation to England, Davies captures her essence and thoroughly analyzes her political development. However, what is left lacking in her discussion of Jones' life is Davies' reasoning as to why the grandmother of intersectionality was left out of the history books, both by Capitalists and Socialists alike. In this work, I use Davies' work on Claudia Jones' life to discern why this is the case and how the factors contributing to her erasure from the public consciousness were so influential in their efforts. By the end of this review, I look at how the separation of one from their ideas plays a pivotal role in their erasure and how this occurred to Claudia Jones.

As a history buff, I relished my only visit to London. Not only did I take the opportunity to visit several museums, but I also visited Karl Marx's grave. Although I did not understand at the time why some visitors were visiting the grave to the left of the famous theorist, I still noticed that the headstone read "Claudia Jones" and promptly forgot about this until a month ago. I did not realize that this woman I knew nothing about until this year would be someone I will never forget. After reading her biography *Left of Karl Marx* by Carol Boyce Davies, Claudia Jones' mark on Marxist theory is blatantly evident, as her theory of super-exploitation expanded the relevance of Marxism to incorporate race and gender into its class analysis. The

experiences which shaped Claudia Jones' political thinking were primarily tied to the sexism and racism she endured, as well as the personal relationships which influenced her growth as a person. Her under-appreciation as a writer and political thinker can also arguably be due to the simplification of her character as a leftist/woman/black person rather than a multidimensional human being. This kind of thought is intrinsically tied to the unique issues experienced by black women, and unfortunately, these issues persist today.

On the topics of racial, sexual, and worker justice, Jones astutely observed that a fight for one was also a fight for

all, seeing that to divide such ideas and goals meant the campaigns would collapse. One must not forget the unique experiences of any three, nor the experiences of those who suffer injustices in multiple camps at once. For Jones, the movement would only progress once black women were allowed to play a central role in the proletariat's emancipation. In her work *For The Unity of Women in The Cause of Peace*, she outlines the importance of the militancy of black women. "We can accelerate the militancy of Negro women to the degree with which we demonstrate that the economic, political and social demands of Negro women are not just ordinary demands, but special demands flowing from special discrimination facing Negro women as women, as workers, and as Negroes" (Jones, 1951). For scholars such as John McClendon, Davies explains and agrees with, maintains that Jones' work ought to be first understood through a Marxist lens, as her feminist stance did not come from a drive towards identity politics but rather as a tool of unifying both sexes of the working class (Davies, 2007). Davies concludes that by taking a closer look at Jones' writing in her work *For the Unity of Women in the Cause of Peace*, there can be found a progression in the hierarchy of importance in the stages of struggle, which begins with women co-managing the campaign for worker equality alongside men and ends with Socialism. That being said, the weakness of McClendon's argument was also pointed out by Davies, as simplifying Jones' views to a purely class struggle-based worldview lacks the depth Jones proposes by focusing on all social issues simultaneously. This is because negating the unique experience working black women have in the movement does not consider the link between black women and Socialism Jones is suggesting. This idea was very personal for Jones, as she experienced pressure even from social groups she was a part of.

On domestic work, Jones wrote her views about women's conditions. She writes, "The lot of the domestic worker is unbearable misery. Usually, she has no definition of tasks in the household where she works. Domestic workers may have 'thrown in' in addition to cleaning and scrubbing, such tasks as washing windows, caring for the children, laundering, cooking, etc. and all at the lowest pay" (Davies, 2007); that is to say, no pay at all. While these sentiments

have slowly been changing in recent decades, with a growing cohort of husbands helping their wives around the house, the position many women find themselves in this day is untenable if the goal is to construct an egalitarian society. However, sexism did not stop at housework, as Foster and Jones agreed that the Communist Party USA struggled with winning over women to the cause over its male-centric leadership and management (Davies, 2007).

Similarly, Jones saw the lengths certain women had to go to stay safe. An example of this would be her recollection of Billie Holiday's incarceration at Alderson Prison, where she refused to perform for a party at the warden's office on the grounds of "violating" her contract (Davies, 2007), with what seems to be the more plausible reason is to avoid harm from her male guards through a vague legal defence. There would be no way to tell if Holiday were to violate her contract on such grounds when asked by the officers, but one shivers to think of the potential consequences a group of men could bestow upon the singer. Other women would not be so lucky, as Jones and the Sojourners often invoke the story of Rosie Lee Ingram, a mother of fourteen who faced life imprisonment for defending herself against a white supremacist who attempted to rape her (Davies, 2007). A similar case was that of Assata Shakur, who had to resist attempted rapes while imprisoned before her escape. Jones' experiences with sexism were only one factor influencing her theory, and racism would play an equally important role.

While she was unashamedly a feminist, she was, more importantly, a black feminist, which made many white women uncomfortable. Davies describes the barriers to Jones' activism from other women, writing: "this was not an easy position for Jones to advance, and it exposed her to a great deal of criticism from white women and the charge that she was guilty of 'reverse chauvinism'. Jones was not directly attacking white women, though she felt that the corporate media was complicit in this representation of white women for all women" (Davies, 2007). This experience is eerily similar to contemporary discussions around race, with the term "reverse racism" having been catapulted into the mainstream not a decade ago. Even more so, as today the term "intersectionality" has come to

mean Jones' "super-exploitation"; and so then it must be recognized that today we find ourselves not strictly in an orthodox Marxist dialogue, but a Jonesian one, for lack of a better term. Jones describes this super-exploitation in her own words: "the most oppressed stratum of the whole population [are black women]... Capitalists exploit woman doubly, both as workers and women. Woman has to face special oppression in every field in capitalist society—as a worker—a wife, a home builder and a citizen" (Jones, 1951). This idea must have been understood by the US government, at least to a degree, as deporting Jones to London and not the Caribbean impeded her organization's efforts. Not because of anti-Communist sentiments in London but because she was first and foremost seen by London Communist leadership as a black woman and then as a comrade. When Claudia Jones arrived in the UK, she had a reception Davies describes as "lukewarm," which was in contrast to the "resounding sendoff" from the Communist Party USA, showing her that she would have to climb the ranks despite the colour of her skin once again (Davies, 2007). Nevertheless, then again, the story of Claudia Jones is not so simple. If she were forgotten by history because she was just black or a woman, this would not correlate so well with her total eradication, and because of this, the stripping of her humanity played the third important role in her erasure.

Call me a romantic, but it does not seem to be the case that she was stomped out of history so thoroughly simply because she was a minority, but rather that her essence, her soul (for lack of a better term), was first stripped away by those who did not, or could not, understand her as a person. Even the most progressive individuals, those who support feminism and the eradication of racism, can slip into the pitfalls of separating the person from their idea. Claudia Jones was more than just a black person, a woman, or a Communist; she had individuals who played vital roles in developing her political thinking. For one, she would not have gotten into journalism (or at least not as enthusiastically) without her father. Growing up, her father was a journalist for one of the black newspapers in Harlem, and Davies describes Claudia's interest in the field because of her father and the career's link to political expression (Davies, 2007). By making such an impact in her life,

Claudia's father ignited a passion and drive that would later see her interviewing other essential figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and W. E. B. Du Bois. In addition to this, her relationships also played vital roles in her development. Jones was married for a time to Abraham Scholnick but later divorced over alleged extramarital relations on Jones' part (one of the presumed men being Howard Johnson) (Davies, 2007). However, this is one topic where it is easy to separate Jones the person from Jones the idea. As little is known about what occurred, it is easy to over-sexualize her, and for many, this would be enough to discredit her ideas.

Moreover, Davies outlines a second inclination by Claudia to marry soon after arriving in London, presumably to Abhimanyu Manchanda whom she had an intimate relationship toward the end of her life (Davies, 2007). Like any other, their relationship had difficulties and moments of joy, which allowed her time to relax amidst the constant campaigning. Davies also suggests that this period of love with Manchanda developed Claudia's analyses and political decisions, one being changing her newspaper's name to include "Asian" news and her burgeoning interest in Communist China (Davies, 2007). Her health can also be seen as a point of politicization. An article written about Claudia during her time in prison was captioned "Claudia Jones Denied Diet Prescribed for Heart Illness". By bringing attention to her treatment in prison, although rightly so, the reader inevitably concludes that refusing prison food is also an act of protest, turning her into a revolutionary figure even when she may not have intended this (although she was very revolutionary). After all this analysis, the question of why her contributions are underappreciated still needs answering.

To this question, the bluntest answer would be stupidity. The more nuanced answer would be stupidity, as defined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer's theory of stupidity purports that it is not a lack of intelligence but rather a moral defect which arises naturally when a group of people come across a loud, powerful, and self-assured individual (Bonhoeffer, 1951). It matters little whether the ideas promoted are logical or well-argued; stupidity is the herd mentality that anyone can succumb to when faced with such an

authoritative speaker, especially in an authoritative system. This phenomenon could also be described as the lack of consciousness, or in Claudia Jones' case, a people's lack of class consciousness. This is why her ideas were too dangerous for states to keep around, as Davies describes the goal of Jones' journalism as "the education of the community [as the] priority, as it was in all of the other journalistic activity in which Claudia Jones was engaged" (Davies, 2007). Even when it came to the carnival in London, Claudia attempted to appeal to the human need for community and then, secondly, educate those who came.

For this reason, the London carnival is seen by Davies as one of the most successful events in making Caribbean culture central to the British experience, even when British comrades opposed its continuation due to its pageantry (Davies, 2007). What these other Communists did not realize, however, is once again the human aspect they attempted to separate from their ideas, and Claudia Jones' ability to maintain the unity between these two concepts made her frighteningly effective. However, one's techniques only remain effective insofar as they outlive you, and unfortunately, the dogmatism of Capitalists and Leftists alike who did not fundamentally understand why these concepts could not be separated was the ultimate downfall of Jones' work. Today, we only remember her work because of those who ensure that human is not cut from their idea, and concepts such as leftist unity and intersectionality show this. Perhaps, then, we ought to remember that all politics is the need to be wanted, to keep safe, and to love one another and that although ideas are a powerful weapon, they are useless once we allow them to be stripped of their humanity. Claudia deserves to be remembered as the intelligent person she was and still is.

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