The Bolshevization of Claude McKay: The Radicalizing Impact of His British Sojourn, 1919-1921

Between 1919 and 1921, Claude McKay spent fourteen months in London, a crucial and transformative moment in his life and work. Yet this is the least studied and understood period of McKay’s life and oeuvre. In this paper, I will, drawing upon newly discovered archival sources (including British intelligence reports), document and analyze the extraordinary impact his British sojourn had on the radicalization of McKay. Crucially, he became an important member of Sylvia Pankhurst’s Workers’ Socialist Federation, the British affiliate of the Communist International (Comintern), and also the de facto editor of its newspaper, the Workers’ Dreadnought, during which time he penned some of his most remarkable articles and poems. But the moment that McKay arrived in Britain and the radical milieu in which he lived and worked also turned out to be profoundly influential in the decolonization of his mind and his full embrace of revolutionary socialism in general and Bolshevism in particular.

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