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**Name**

Sydney Marenburg

**Title of Paper**

Socialism, Race, and Gender: Examining the Fracturing of Leftist Politics on the Lines of Race and Womanhood

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**Faculty Name**

Professor Taylor Desloge

**Student Major**

History Major

## Narrative Questions

- 1. Describe how you came to choose your topic, specifically noting any pre-research that you did. What sources did you use in this pre-research? To what extent did you consult with librarians, faculty, or others? How did this pre-research lead you to your topic?**

Spring of 2023, I took another class with Professor Desloge, Poverty and Inequality in the US where we got the opportunity to explore archive holdings in the Linda Lear center at Connecticut College and got to learn about some of the writing we have of Olive M Johnson. The research I did for that short presentation is what I consider to be my pre-research, consulting two of the pamphlets that Connecticut College owns, *Women and Socialism* and *The American School*. Additionally, I referred to *The Encyclopedia of the American Left* as a secondary source about Johnson. When I then took the fall class, "Black Freedom Struggle," we had to write a large research paper as our final, and I knew I needed a writing sample for when I apply to grad school. Working with Professor Desloge, I developed a paper to serve as both a final and a grad school writing sample considering the role of intersectionality in early twentieth-century leftist politics. There is a limited number of sources about Olive Johnson, so I had to turn to her writing. When I first started, the only detailed information about her was a wikipedia article which was mostly taken from a one paragraph long encyclopedia entry. Otherwise, she was a mere footnote in discussing the lives of other early twentieth century socialist men. Thankfully, I was able to work with Jennifer Ishee to see what more I could find in Conn's archives but then turned to Andrew Lopez for a research consultation. With Andrew, we found even more writing by Johnson, including the treasure trove of a resource the *Weekly People* on microfilm. Once I found the newspaper with plenty of writing by Johnson and other discussions of early interpretations of intersectionality, I felt confident that I would be able to write a paper examining the role of women on the American political left. While she may not have been politically effective on a wide scale, Johnson's contributions and efforts regarding the political mobilization of women at the cusp of suffrage allowed women to be educated voters with multiple political ideologies open to them.

- 2. Describe your process of finding information for your project. Note specifically the tools you used to undertake your research, as well as the specific search strategies you used within these tools. (Note: “Ebsco,” being an umbrella vendor, is not a specific enough response when identifying tools; listing the “library database” is also an unacceptably vague answer. Specific tools include JSTOR, America: History & Life, Web of Science, etc., along with OneSearch, the new library system.)**

Before I had access to the Weekly People microfilm, I relied upon library resources such as the ProQuest Historical Newspaper database. In that database, I found that it was most helpful to narrow my search years down as much as possible, starting with one year increments at a time to comb through each result. Additionally, I used varying spellings of “Olive M Johnson,” and also tied her to ideas of socialism and women. A great deal of my research came from newspapers and newspaper databases, whether from ProQuest Historical Newspapers, Newspapers.com through Ancestry, or the microfilm archive of the Weekly People, borrowed from the New York State Public Library. In the newspapers, it was easy enough to find information about Johnson, as the two databases did have their items digitized and searchable. My other technique was to sort mentions by state, and in this way I was successful in weeding out some casual mentions such as wedding announcements of unrelated people, even with the same name. When attempting to use OneSearch, it was a bit harder to find mentions of Johnson that were not her own writing, so at this time, I did not find the use of it when directly related to Johnson worth it. What I did use OneSearch for was finding other resources to understand subjects like early feminism, the lives and philosophy of WEB DuBois and Claudia Jones, and other political movements on the left. Through OneSearch, I found many of my sources on JSTOR, one of my most beloved parts of having access to Connecticut College’s library access. Through JSTOR, I had access to texts about the heterodoxy movement, interpretations of DuBois’ views on race and socialism, and foundations of the Socialist Labor Party which Johnson was a part of.

**3. Describe your process of evaluating the resources you found. How did you make decisions about which resources you would use, and which you wouldn't? What kinds of questions did you ask yourself about resources in order to determine whether they were worthy of inclusion?**

For as much as possible, I tried to rely on sources that contained the own words of contemporaries of Johnson. When attempting to write a paper that included such broad ideas of race, gender, electoralism, and class, I had to focus as much as possible on my core thesis, examining Johnson and her role in the political left as a woman in the early twentieth century. With the focus on the thesis, I had to look at texts which did not stray too far from my roughly ten year timeframe of the 1910s, making an exception for Claudia Jones as I did want to see a continuation of Johnson's work a few decades later. When finding the newspaper clippings and information about Johnson and her political work, I had to be quite selective regarding my inclusions because she was mentioned so much. I had far more examples of advertisements of Johnson's speeches and lectures than are mentioned in my essay. There were also a number of other books which I found and referenced for background research, but unfortunately many texts when studying feminism and socialism tend to focus on eras following the second world war. My most challenging question I had to consider when reviewing possible sources was did they have to do with advancing my examination of either women in leftist politics, or race in American leftist politics within the early twentieth century. I had so many books recommended to me stacked on my desk, all which would have been interesting, but only limited time to review them. My criteria for sources was they either had to be written by the individual I was writing about, a very narrow time span, preferably including an event my individual participated in, or the ability to concisely describe larger world ramifications of an event or trend of the decade of the 1920s. The book I found which matched several of my requirements and that I found the most useful, even though the main focus of the book is a couple decades outside of my interest, was Red Feminism.

**Socialism, Race, and Gender: Examining the Fracturing of Leftist Politics on the Lines of  
Race and Womanhood Through Olive M. Johnson**  
**Sydney Marenburg**

**Dr. Taylor Desloge**

**Black Freedom Struggle**

**December 8, 2023**

## **A Hat in the Ring**

The room was large, and the audience small. The seats in the front few rows were a sea of hats. Plumes the length of someone's arm, brims wide enough to shelter two beneath its cover. And in front of the room of only a few dozen newly minted voters, the host of the evening would introduce the Women's Suffrage Party members from the eleventh and seventeen districts to the speakers for the evening. That night was the latest in their symposium series, introducing the numerous political parties that would populate the New York State Ballot for the 1918 election. The topic of socialism was on the mind, with speakers from both the Socialist Labor Party and the Socialist Party in attendance. After New York State legalized women's right to vote in November of 1917, organizations pivoted from just coveting the ability to vote to determine what could be done with it.

Mrs. Johnson, as she was announced, though introducing herself as Comrade Johnson, was called up to speak from her chair. One can imagine the independent figure of Johnson standing, smoothing out her skirt and approaching the podium. Even before she speaks, a commanding figure with her eyes bright as she peered over the present audience would have silenced any lingering murmurs. In a clear and booming voice, Johnson begins her prepared speech with her usual "clear-sighted and logical way" as she presented how capitalism and the subjugation of women throughout history were inherently intertwined. Her call was for the women present that night to become active in politics and bring the energy of revolution back to their luncheons and visiting hours with friends. After her twenty minutes of speaking time were up and she took a step back from the podium, the small audience erupted in applause, demonstrating thanks for the presentation they had just received.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Times Union (Brooklyn, New York) 8 May 1918.

One woman in the audience spoke up above the crowd to ask whether any of the Socialist parties operating in New York would be nominating a woman on the election ticket for that November. Mrs. Johnson, without any hesitation, announced that in fact, one had already been selected. With that, she was named to be the gubernatorial candidate for the state.

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I will be looking at OMJ during the height of her political career in NYC while she navigates what it means to be a woman and a leader in the Socialist Labor Party. I argue that Johnson was caught between two models of political organizing as she entered into electoral politics: the SLP's focus on class-based struggle and the women's suffrage movement's vision of political solidarity based on gender. This chapter will attempt to analyze Johnson's writing based on her audience changing from a published theorist to an occasional writer for the *Weekly People*, to the paper's editor, and then to a public-facing figure as a candidate for governor. She is not the only person facing this complication.

Ultimately, this chapter will compare Johnson's political career during the second decade of the 20th century to two other activists working in New York at the same time and in the decades thereafter—W.E.B. Du Bois and Claudia Jones— who both faced the challenge of reconciling their race or gender identity with their vision for socialism. Race and gender presented an almost insurmountable challenge that hampered the potential for left-wing politics. No matter how successful a woman might have been, she would not have been able to be a public leader of her own platform, and even then, as Johnson was, she would have been used as a token to prove a point or work towards some other cause. For Johnson, her identity within the SLP was that of being a woman first and a socialist second and those around her in the party reinforced this time and time again, refusing to separate her gender from her politics.



## A Woman as Rising Star of the Party

The decade began with Johnson's status within the party rising. By 1910, Johnson cemented herself as a figure in the SLP following her reporting of the Haywood trial proceedings. She participated in the International Socialist Congregation in Sweden as the official American representative from the SLP and after the event concluded, conducted a speaking tour of the country on the American Labor Movement until some time in 1911.<sup>2</sup> At this time, there is no evidence of her in the United States Census for 1910, and her time overseas could be a possible explanation for her absence. The earliest she could have been out of the country would have been in late June of 1910 and have arrived back in the United States by August of 1911. At this point, she is still living in California, but even there, she continued the momentum of her prominence in the party. Newspapers from Ohio to California have advertisements in their back pages advertising the "Woman Socialist to Lecture."<sup>3</sup>

To bring Johnson back to the East Coast, Johnson got the opportunity to work closely with Daniel DeLeon himself. The SLP assisted with the court case of a man who had been arrested and charged with disorderly conduct during a strike in a textile factory in New Jersey. The charges were supposedly fabricated, and it was retaliation for the man as the leader of the strike and organizing force of the union. Johnson and DeLeon were asked to participate as a lobbying force to intervene between the company that had him arrested and the legal process.<sup>4</sup> It is easy to imagine the connection and relationship that would have developed between two such strong minded individuals. From this moment, Johnson seems to have made a significant impression on the party founder and, shortly after moved to New York to begin assisting the SLP

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<sup>2</sup> DeLeon, Solon. *The American Labor Who's who*. Edited by Irma C. Hayssen and Grace Poole. New York, New York: Hanford Press, 1925. 117.

<sup>3</sup> *The times dispatch*. [volume] (Richmond, Va.), 27 Aug. 1911.

<sup>4</sup> *Echo : Wochenblatt der Vereinigten Deutschen Socialisten Clevelands*. (Cleveland, Ohio), 27 July 1912. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

at party headquarters. Two years later in 1914, Daniel DeLeon passed, leaving a rupture in the party and a revolving door of newspaper editors and party leaders began.

Faith in the SLP was also waning, with membership dropping steadily between 1914 and 1916. Without a strong leader, many in the party felt that progress could not be made and would instead default to regional factions as national issues were not being addressed. The infighting in the party combined with the rise of prominence of the SP with Eugene Deb's moderately successful presidential campaign, made the SLP seem like a sinking ship. Nonetheless, Johnson seemed to stay loyal. Her unwavering support for DeLeon motivated her as she began to write analyses of his work and a number of articles describing the shame he would feel towards the party were he still alive. To reinforce her involvement with the SLP once DeLeon passed, Johnson began to take a stronger role in representing the party, and particularly the interests of women. Drawing on speeches and writing DeLeon had produced during his life, Johnson initially wrote a text that was published first in 1908 and then reissued in 1919.

Her *Women and the Socialist Movement* begins by justifying a difference between the male and female sexes based on evolutionary and prehistoric behaviors, seeing men as protectors and thinkers to a "higher degree."<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, women, "a necessity to the life of the infant," have a need to be confined to domestic behaviors, even saying that women as a whole have "less energy and endurance" than men.<sup>6</sup> Even while holding to gender essentialist theory, she still supports a theory of matriarchal control with women controlling finances and property.<sup>7</sup> She continued her history of the subjugation of women from the Greeks and the Romans through Medieval Society and up to her present. She claims that women faced the "stigma that past slavery and serfdom throw upon them" and that the only way to crawl out from the systemic

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<sup>5</sup> Olive M. Johnson, *Women and the Socialist Movement* (New York, New York: Labor News Co., 1908), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, 4.

oppression women face is to dismantle the world in which they live.<sup>8</sup> In November of 1917, New York State legalized women's right to vote, leading to opportunities for Johnson to run for governor and then later mayor of the state. In 1919, the republishing of *Women and the Socialist Movement* would have been a further political commentary with the nineteenth amendment up for ratification having been approved by Congress.

According to Johnson, to further push the narrative around early ideas of women's liberation, was reexamining the concept and practice of marriage. One of her goals for the future, specifically regarding marriage, was for there to be a "new morality, a union based on mutual love and faith."<sup>9</sup> She shames men for not devoting the appropriate time and energy to their families, trapping women in loveless and abusive marriages because they are unable to access property or safety otherwise without a male protector and representative.

### **Comrade/Mrs./Ms./Miss**

Johnson had to straddle a thin line between her gender politics and her party politics. Her party members, when formerly addressed, were given the honorific "comrade," or none was used at all. More often than not, Johnson is known as "Mrs." When a women's club was to be organized, she was marketed as the main attraction to speak on women's issues in the world. She does write on other subjects, but when she takes her tours in 1905 and 1910 representing the United State's SLP at the international conference and then intercontinental speaking engagements in 1918, she seems to have been a strong yet potentially nonthreatening presence as a representative of the party. She was incredibly well-versed in party politics and the platform, but perhaps due to her gender and middle age, she could have been a more inviting face of socialism than the ranting Debs of the Socialist Party.

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<sup>8</sup> Johnson, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, 12.

While Johnson was editor of the *Weekly People*, a nationwide ideological change regarding women was taking place. The “New Woman” was a young woman who would not have to be confined to housework or other labor under the direction of a direct male supervisor. Rather, there were new opportunities for women in the job market and even expanded learning. Johnson, in fact, takes advantage of more of these opportunities for women when she attends college at Hunter, graduating in 1916. Although Hunter was founded in 1870, by the time that Johnson attends it had expanded from solely being a teaching preparatory institution. It followed other curricula that new women’s colleges being opened were also offering. Other schools which formed to support the new interest in women’s higher education were Sweet Briar College, University of Mary Washington, James Madison University, and Connecticut College. Even though Johnson would have been close to two decades older than her peers at forty-four when she graduated, she was willing to support her female comrades to push for them to not be “perpetual nursemaids and dishwashers.”<sup>10</sup>

Considering Johnson left her husband, her statements and views regarding marriage may give a clue as to what her relationship was like. By 1919, she had found her own independent career to support herself, that of being the newspaper editor, but she also claimed that she had jobs working in a factory shop, a store, a restaurant, an office, a housekeeper,, and a teacher. She continued to work the rest of her life to maintain her independence, perhaps seeing a life of work and scraping by as preferable to having to be reliant on a partner.<sup>11</sup>

For all of Johnson’s radical views of womanhood and even marriage for the time, one needs to wonder why she chose to remain with her support for the Socialist Labor Party rather than join the National Woman’s Party or even participate in the Heterodoxy Movement, which

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<sup>10</sup> “Radicals Can Be Good Wives, Says Mrs. Olive Johnson, Scoffing at Husband’s Suit,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 24, 1929.

<sup>11</sup> DeLeon, 117.

would have been local to her in New York. It is reasonable to assume that the National Woman's Party would have supported her attempts to run for elected office, with a newspaper columnist stating that "No woman who insists on voting for some other woman...will have to write a name in...Her chances are small, but that is a small consideration with the suffragettes."<sup>12</sup> This snippet in particular, refers to her run for Governor of the state of New York in 1918. Johnson is also recorded as speaking to the Woman Suffrage Party in Bedford, New York, about the advantages of voting for the SLP ticket. Some of Johnson's statements regarding the party seem exaggerated, such as her claim that the party "represented 70 percent of the total population of the country."<sup>13</sup> Considering that Johnson got only twelve thousand signatures for her electoral petition, whereas the other parties held votes, gathering a total of over one million registered voters. To put that in a cleaner number, Johnson got .00012% of the votes across the state of New York in September of 1918.<sup>14</sup>

### **Gender As A Single Issue Voter**

Other historians such as Kate Weigand and Nancy Cott argue that the further splintering of political movements around single-issue platforms meant that women had to pick what the issue they cared about the most was. Whether that was domestic reform policies like child and healthcare, living conditions, or prohibition, that movement within groups such as the National Women's Party disparaged socialism and other leftist politics for being too radical and instead preferring to reform existing systems, putting most of their weight behind women's rights. On the other side, the leftist parties, in particular the most popular US Communist Party (CPUSA), rather would target a systemic overhaul of everyday life and class, but refused to acknowledge

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<sup>12</sup> *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 12 September, 1918.

<sup>13</sup> "Socialism Put Before Women," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 1918.

<sup>14</sup> "Woman Socialist Runs For Governor," *New York Tribune*, September 12, 1918.

the need for explicit rights for women, going so far as to be against women's suffrage because what would the use of voting be if it were to still be voting for an unjust system?<sup>15</sup>

Johnson, who was not generally a single-issue voter, saw the benefits of socialism over joining a socialistic party because it would enable her to share more of her own personal beliefs. The SLP gave her a platform to even discuss her views on the concept of monogamy. It is difficult to ascertain her personal beliefs versus those of which she held to remain socially acceptable, as she was still living in the early twentieth century American culture. Comparing her ideology from *Women in the Socialist Movement* to her opinions on the Mebel lawsuit, a case of a husband wanting to divorce his wife for her political activity and the assumption that she is not paying him enough attention, there is a shift.<sup>16</sup> In her earlier work, Johnson seems to view non-monogamy as a plausible option for a relationship, saying that the reason it fell out of favor was because it was difficult for a single male breadwinner to support a larger number of dependents such as multiple wives and their children. She critiques monogamous marriage for a loss of community and resources for large family structures to support each other. What is unable to be determined is her opinion on intergenerational families living together because it would also provide the same form of community that I believe she is referring to. In the public eye such as when Johnson was running for Mayor of New York, she returns back to explicitly defending the United State's practice of institutional marriage, stating that "the Socialist-Laborites envision a change in marriage...toward more monogamy instead of less."<sup>17</sup> There are even other respectability political tactics being taken, reinforcing her American alliance and shunning the foreign influences of the "Russian regulations" and attitudes towards marriage.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> "Radicals Can Be Good Wives, Says Mrs. Olive Johnson, Scoffing at Husband's Suit," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 24, 1929.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

## Home to Roost in New York

A possible reason for Johnson's more permanent arrival to the east coast could have not only been to participate in party headquarters, but also to push for more educational opportunities. Johnson had the opportunity to obtain a four-year undergraduate degree at Hunter College in 1916 and also participated in graduate studies at Columbia and then a few years later at New York University. At no point is there a record of Johnson getting an official graduate degree, whether that is a masters or a doctorate. This is not unusual for the time, as while women may have been taking classes, they would not have been welcomed into a full-fledged graduate study program. From 1890 to 1920, only twelve women were awarded full doctorates for a school such as UC Berkeley. Information regarding both Columbia and NYU was unavailable at the time of research, but based on other information, it can be assumed that Johnson would have not even been in consideration for a full program.<sup>19</sup>

The 1910s were a decade where Johnson moved from merely supporting the party to being a featured and important member of the SLP. She moves to New York to be closer to the party's headquarters and travels overseas back to Sweden to be a representative at the International Socialist Conference. Furthermore, she undertakes a wider tour of Sweden to discuss US Socialist policy and also report back tactics that could be utilized in the United States, taking inspiration from the more progressive Scandinavian countries as well as Germany's pre-World War 1 social policy. Not only taking inspiration from international politics, fellow American progressive theorists would have influenced Johnson's philosophy. When she got placed on recommended reading lists for subjects ranging from women and politics to the

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<sup>19</sup> "Coeducation in the Graduate Programs, 1884-1942." Coeducation: Coeducation in Graduate Schools | Columbia University Libraries. Accessed March 4, 2024. <https://library.columbia.edu/libraries/cuarchives/resources/coeducation/gradschools.html>.

impact of governments on their political parties, her contemporaries, from whom she borrowed and elaborated on ideas, were listed next to her.<sup>20</sup>

Arriving in New York City around 1912, Johnson would have found a thriving scene for progressive politics. From socialists to anarchists, labor organizers, and civil rights activists, there was a political ideology for everyone. In a way, Johnson was not a unique figure in the New York scene in the early 20th century. Women across the city were taking up political and social action. There were women leading the fight for better working conditions such as Clara Lemlich and Rose Schnider. There were women working for reform of healthcare and living conditions such as Lillian D Wald, and other causes such as women's suffrage. There were also women in Harlem who were fighting for racial equality such as Ella Baker. Even in the SLP, there were a number of other women active in organizing who Johnson worked closely with.

What did set her apart from other women in the party was her attention to a national platform. Johnson in this period of her life began to write prolifically in newspaper columns for the *Weekly People* as well as travel around the country speaking to audiences on subjects from women's political action, socialism as a political ideology, and international events. An interesting pattern that emerges regarding Johnson's work is that while she certainly does take on issues in her writing regarding the intricacies of what a socialist revolution would look like, she often defaults back to subjects which are traditionally gendered like education, women's labor, and domestic issues. It is clear that Johnson is engaging in intellectual dialogue with other authors in her lifetime.

### **Johnson on Tour**

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<sup>20</sup> *Woman and Economics*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman; *Woman and Social Progress*, Scott Nearing; *Woman and Labor*; Olive Schreiner. See Appendix Image A for the complete list.



The past eight years of Johnson's life had been leading to 1918. She was given the opportunity to go on a national tour once again, this time advocating for the action of women in the SLP and to encourage membership building even in the face of a global war and growing concerns about socialism and the further left communism, including direct government action against groups such as the IWW. Working closely with the National Secretary of the party, Arnold Peterson, a schedule was developed for Johnson, traveling from coast to coast, stopping often in Chicago, and even going back to her home of Minneapolis. For each speaking engagement she was booked for, the rate was five dollars, and it was requested that two to three engagements be arranged. Some chapters, such as the one from Buffalo, New York, had to send their regrets that even though they would have been excited to have Johnson to speak, their chapter coffers would be unable even to support one lecture. And, in a rare moment of Johnson's age beginning to be apparent, at almost fifty years old, a number of communications between Johnson and Peterson contain requests and arguments for more break days between traveling and lectures, finally Peterson conceded to give her one day a week of no travel and no bookings, but at times, it was still not enough for her.<sup>21</sup>

Even while going on her national tour for the party, in March of 1918, Johnson is selected to run for governor of New York as the first woman candidate. It would not be until a hundred years later in 2021 that a woman would finally be elected for the position. March 30th, when the New York State convention was convened, would have been at the same time that she would have been presenting in Detroit, Michigan.<sup>22</sup> To get the nomination, it seems that two letters were sent to her just days before the committee would have been met, informing her of the intention to nominate her. She sent her willingness to accept the nomination if granted to her in both a

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<sup>21</sup> Olive M. Johnson to Mr. Arnold Peterson (New York, New York, March 5, 1918).

<sup>22</sup> "Mrs. Johnson In Detroit," *The Weekly People*, March 23, 1918.

telegram and then elaborated on her response in a letter to Petersen. She said, “I feel rather favorably inclined towards the idea, particularly if trouble is ahead, as it might well be.”<sup>23</sup> The trouble she was discussing was the dissatisfaction in the party and the splitting of a previously influential woman from the party in favor of the SP. An interesting insight into her motivation to work for the SLP is revealed, though. She laments that her life would be easier and more comfortable if she had gone into a more steady and traditional line of work, but finding a great deal of encouragement from her other party members, in particular women, she felt that it was important to keep up the cause to give her fellow women a candidate they could believe in.<sup>24</sup>

The financial concerns for Johnson were going to be in a perilous state, as if she ran for governor of New York, it might jeopardize other options for her such as applying for teaching or tutoring positions. In fact, one of the upsides for Johnson were she to run and win the election would be the government salary she would receive. While Johnson would work hard remotely campaigning and having others campaign for her, she would ultimately lose. But, the ability of Johnson to have been nominated gives a wonderful view of what women’s politics were in the early twentieth century.

## **A WOMAN SOCIALIST**

When Johnson first ran for governor in New York in 1918, the cries of amazement from around the country were not at her politics. The astonishing aspect of her campaign is that she was a woman! The heading of an article with some variation of “Woman Runs for N.Y. Governor” was featured in papers from Georgia, Arizona, Texas, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, and New York. The announcement of her running was the only one of its kind in the non-New York papers. Nowhere else was the rest of the SLP’s ticket published. For the United States in 1918,

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<sup>23</sup> Olive M. Johnson to Mr. Arnold Peterson (New York, New York, March 28, 1918).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

the most shocking thing a politician could be was a woman, not even a socialist. Especially at that moment in time coming up on the first red-scare, there seemed to be a blase nature about her associated political party. Furthermore, the tone of the short articles tend to be very patronizing. In Georgia and Texas, of the three sentences dedicated to her campaign, one of them reads “While she won’t be elected, she believes she will convince many that women can make a good campaign.” At this time, it is unable to be determined where the papers got this supposed quote from her, but it is reasonable to assume that there were editorial choices made by the almost exclusively male editor teams.

### **Editor of the Party**

The role that Johnson took on to have the most influence on the party was when she became the editor of the *Weekly People* newspaper. The *Weekly People* was the main English language publication produced by the SLP and had a wide reach with distribution on both coasts, and a few thousand copies being printed each week. The previous editor, Edmund Seidel, had been in his position for two years, gathering discontent from fellow party members. What changed was in March 1918, letters from Seidel were shared which contained sentiments of wanting to abolish and remove the non-English speaking chapters and members of the SLP from under the organizational structure. There were also discussions of mail fraud organized by him and general disinterest in the party, and a refusal to cooperate with party management and policy conductors.

By mid-April of 1918, Seidel was removed from his position and a temporary editor, Olive M Johnson, was appointed to be in charge of the paper until a permanent individual could be selected. Johnson was also given Peterson's assistance while she was still on her tour. Critiques from other SLP members said that she was unqualified for the position of editor and

that she was only being placed so that Peterson could extend another form of control to take over the party himself due to their close relationship. On April 25th, a vote with the National Executive Committee was conducted to agree to pay Johnson a salary of twenty-five dollars a week, a sum that she supposedly requested but was still poverty wages.

Almost instantly, Johnson began making changes to the paper. She instituted an editor's column, giving her a platform for the expression of her opinions on a consistent basis. Her writing in this column ranged from a typical single column or a few paragraphs to an entire page. Additionally, she started writing other articles in the paper, unfortunately, many are unattributed to anyone in particular, but writing patterns and characteristics are evident and she develops a position on voter access for American soldiers overseas and continues to push for equitable education opportunities. The comment period for the position of editor ended in early October, and there were almost fifty nominations for Johnson to remain as the editor in a permanent position. The votes were nearly unanimous and Johnson would then keep the position for the next two decades, one of the longest serving members of the National Executive Committee in the SLP.

### **Olive Johnson in Context**

As a woman working in progressive circles in the early 20th century, Olive Johnson had a lot working against her. At the time, most leftist movements around the world had a policy of not acknowledging the intricacies of identities among their comrades. It was considered antithetical to socialist ideology because under socialism, everyone was to be equal and it would not matter what race, ethnicity, or gender you were. The only identity that should be valued would be class because once class equality was achieved, then all else would fall into place. For African

Americans and women in leftist movements, class was but one of the many oppressions bearing down on their lives.

### **WEB DuBois and Double Consciousness**

Just as today, activists in the early twentieth century had to choose between the extent of their values and political action and the associated parties. While the SLP did not focus on the “woman question” from its conception to the extent Johnson perhaps wanted them to, it explicitly chose to ignore race-based struggles. In the 1890s, Daniel DeLeon explicitly stated that “there was no such thing as a race or ‘Negro question’... there was only a social, a labor question...so far as the socialist and labor movements were concerned.”<sup>25</sup> The ignoring of racial struggles, which obviously disproportionately targeted working-class African Americans, alienated a potential group for allyship within the SLP’s cause. Many Black radicals in the United States chose to join the Communist Party or the Socialist Party. Interestingly, the Communists could be considered to be just left of the SLP and the Socialists to be just ever so slightly right. The Socialist Party of America advocated for a racially integrated movement, although they saw racism as a result of capitalism and believed that if capitalism was destroyed, racism would go with it.<sup>26</sup>

For Black Americans, such as W.E.B. DuBois, they did not have the luxury of waiting for capitalism to fail in the hope that racism would also disappear. In Du Bois’ February 1929 speech for the Rand School, “The Socialist Party and the Negro,” he rails against the hypocritical nature of the socialist movements for simultaneously shaming African Americans for taking the only jobs that are open to them, while also wondering why more Black people would not join the party. Du Bois saw the future of the party as one that would have to fight for “economic justice”

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<sup>25</sup> DeLeon, 117.

<sup>26</sup> Robin D.G Kelley and Aja Monet, *Freedom Dreams the Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 2022). 40.

because the refusal to allow Black Americans into the party while also acknowledging their racial differences would continue to give bosses ammunition to use non-white workers as scabs and to continue to drive down wages and foil negotiation plans.<sup>27</sup>

A weakness of contemporary leftist movements to Du Bois and the relationship between socialist politics and the fight for civil rights was their attempt to appease potential allies in the form of white conservative southerners.<sup>28</sup> Admittedly, Du Bois' observations of the Socialists being “afraid to make a direct appeal to the negro vote” did have a basis for it, as during a 1931 mine strike in Kentucky when the integrated Communist party sent representatives down to help provide mutual aid and other assistance to the striking community, and as a result, other organizations such as the American Red Cross would not assist those miners who were prior supporters of the Communists.<sup>29</sup> So for Southerners who already had a tumultuous relationship with racial politics, it was a worry to align oneself with socialism during the period of the United States' first red scare.

But, Du Bois critiques the hesitancy to alienate the white southern vote as one of copping out on their goals. He is scathing towards the party, saying that “Everybody is in favor of justice so long as it costs them no effort.”<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, this is Johnson's critique of the Socialist party as well, believing that those not in the SLP were not willing to push the political envelope and were too willing to cave to centrist pressures.<sup>31</sup> While the Socialist party may have wanted to have a nationally applicable platform, Du Bois brings to light that due to cultural differences across regions, the party must be willing to amend and target different interests than what they

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<sup>27</sup> William Edward Burghardt DuBois, “The Socialist Party and the Negro” (speech, Rand School, February 1929). 1.

<sup>28</sup> Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Surry Hills, NSW, Australia: Accessible Publishing Systems, 2010), 54.

<sup>29</sup> Members of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, *Harlan Miners Speak: Report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Dubois, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Olive M. Johnson, “Armed Intervention,” *The Weekly People*, October 25, 1919.

may have been interested in the first place.<sup>32</sup> Other scholars, such as Micheal Dawson, have noted that there was a concern among white leftist leadership of their parties being identified as being “too black.”<sup>33</sup> Du Bois would have had to watch the political party he had aligned himself with time and time again deny concerns about the very real racial violence and inequality that was inflicted on African Americans.

Decades before Du Bois wrote his speech, presidential candidate Eugene Debs stated that “There is no ‘Negro problem,’ apart from the general labor problem. The Negro is no one whit worse off than thousands of white slaves.” and ‘The class struggle is colorless.’ The capitalists, white, black, and all other colors, on the other side.”<sup>34,35</sup> It is difficult to imagine how Du Bois must have experienced his dual interaction with the Socialist Party, where he would have been told that unity through a political party that wants to tear down the existing systems in place would have been liberating to hear, but then to experience hostility due to racial inequality within the same group that was supposedly calling for equality and removal of class barriers. Micheal Dawson saw the struggle that would have existed for Black leftists in conversation with white leftists as being unbalanced, for the working class who would have benefited from a socialist revolution, one side was fighting for economic equality and rights in the workplace. Meanwhile, the other was fighting against lynching and a constant threat of violence and an expectation of racial inferiority.<sup>36</sup>

Because Du Bois had to straddle two ideological worlds, from his political activism with the fight for social change in an economic sense to his then work with the NAACP, he found himself pushed out of the projects he had devoted his life’s work to from both fights. From the

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<sup>32</sup> Dubois, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, n.d.). 3,

<sup>34</sup> Eugene V. Debs, “On the Color Question,” *Appeal to Reason*, July 4, 1903, 396 edition.

<sup>35</sup> Eugene V. Debs, “The Negro In The Class Struggle,” *International Socialist Review* IV, no. 5 (November 1903).

<sup>36</sup> Dawson, 27.

NAACP, he was asked to step down from the organization due to his association with leftist politics in a time of growing fear for communism, especially in the aftermath of the Second World War. Meanwhile, from the Socialist Party, he grew disenfranchised with the party as they refused to meaningfully recognize racial discrimination and an attempt to defeat racism to also combat capitalism.<sup>37</sup>

Du Bois was considered too radical for the radical movements he was a part of because he wanted to view economic politics holistically. He had to contend with a struggle of white leftists who wanted to preserve the white hierarchy, because not doing so in the face of capitalism would ultimately have destroyed whatever privilege they did have. Were white progressives to have made an active effort towards racial justice, there would have been more efforts to solidify anti-lynching legislation and to police their own communities, especially further south.<sup>38</sup> Even when working with the party, Du Bois was stuck between wanting complete integration of non-white members into committees and local chapters, but then many found their voices overlooked and issues ignored as they were a small group when compared to the white majority. But, when Black socialists founded their own committees, it was used against them in an argument for the white groups to say that the Black socialists would not be willing to work towards greater economic liberation.<sup>39</sup>

Du Bois, even while working towards Black liberation on the left, did not see women as being able to be active participants in the fight. Even when given the opportunity to work with Ida B. Wells, the incredible muckraker who brought advocacy for anti-lynching efforts to the forefront, he said that “nothing more than membership was expected of her in the NAACP.”<sup>40</sup> If

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<sup>37</sup> Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Oakley C. Johnson, ca. March 1961

<sup>38</sup> Dawson, 27.

<sup>39</sup> Jeffrey Babcock Perry, *Hubert Harrison the Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883-1918* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).169-172.

<sup>40</sup> Dawson, 137.



there would not have been support for Black women's suffrage opportunities on the part of white women, men, and in particular Black men did not seem to be stepping up to help tackle these issues themselves.

### **Claudia Jones**

As Johnson only examined her gender identity in her politics and Du Bois considered his race, individuals such as Claudia Jones were forced to reckon with both. Jones, an immigrant to the United States, would have overlapped both Johnson and DuBois in their careers even though she was several decades younger than the other two institutional figures on the left. Her introduction to progressive organizing politics was her work with the Scottsboro Defense committee to free nine young Black men who were accused of the sexual assault of a white woman. According to Angela Davis' biography of Jones, this moment brought her in contact with members of the Communist party, who welcomed her into their cause with open arms.<sup>41</sup> Like Johnson, Jones quickly became the authority and leader of women in the movement, assuming the position of leader of the Women's Commission and undertaking efforts to represent the diverse experiences of women in the United States for the Communist party.<sup>42</sup> Jones also saw the power of written theory to disseminate through party means, and once again like Johnson, her first successful publication was a theory on how women's participation in leftist movements should be acknowledged and appreciated.

"An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women" was a continuation of theory that had been published in leftist circles from the previous nearly half century. Drawing on inspiration from figures such as Emma Goldman, Clara Zetkin, Milly Witkop-Rocker, the text *Women Under Socialism* by August Bebel, and other texts such as those by Olive Johnson and

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<sup>41</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Women Race & Class* (London: Women's Press, 1982), 98.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman which would have been in the public consciousness, Jones would have been familiar with her contemporary feminist discourse, but also how it left Black women out of the picture. Within the first page, Jones accuses the left of leaving Black Americans, and in particular Black women out of their vision for a revolutionary future. “This Neglect (referring to Black women) has too long permeated the ranks of the labor movement generally, of Left-progressives, and also of the Communist Party.”<sup>43</sup> If Johnson and the SLP wanted to highlight women’s participation in the progressive movement, but would not look at other identities than class and gender, and Du Bois and his comrades in the Socialist Party would focus on class and race but refuse to acknowledge gender and even actively work to keep women out of the party, how was a woman like Claudia Jones to find a place in the movement?

To Jones, the other exclusion meant that she needed to do her own work and build her own community who would value her skills and knowledge. Historians like Carole Boyce Davies argue that Claudia Jones and other female leftists were more radical than even the founders of modern leftist movements like Karl Marx or Daniel DeLeon because they had to create their own forms of leftist philosophy to be included. Eurocentrism and male focus were at the root of western leftist philosophies between the consistent non-acknowledgement of the impact of colonial patterns and colonial liberation outside of the United States or Mainland Europe, and not considering domestic activities a form of labor.<sup>44</sup> Racial and gender-based oppression went hand in hand, and to have an effective revolution, according to Jones, meant that those classifiers had to be destroyed before class.<sup>45</sup> Jones, just as DuBois, would have experienced from her predominately white comrades views of the concerns of Black or other minority Americans as

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<sup>43</sup>Claudia Jones, "An end to the neglect of the problems of the Negro woman!" (1949). *PRISM: Political & Rights Issues & Social Movements*. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/prism/4673>.

<sup>44</sup> Jones, 5,

<sup>45</sup> Davis, 98.

issues which were only distractions of the larger issue, and would not be addressed until a leftist victory or implementation of some other practical solution program where the real answer would have to be a near complete attitudinal shift.<sup>46</sup>

While there was not a leftist revolution in the United States, whether socialist or communist, Jones made the most significant contribution to feminist politics introducing the idea of a “triple oppression” paradigm regarding the experiences of women of color in the United States.<sup>47</sup> Jones’ theory had been influenced by other feminist thinkers just as Johnson had been influenced by her contemporaries, and was able to make it apply to fellow leftists rather than saying the experiences would not be applicable to those supposedly more liberated movements. Jones believed that without Black women’s liberation, liberation for any women would be impossible because there would always be a demographic that those in the ruling class could weaponize their actions against.<sup>48</sup> Women were at the forefront of social issues, from feeling the impact of low wages and rising prices of housing and necessary goods, to being on the front lines of strikes whether in terms of support for picketlines or participating themselves in labor reforms, but more often than not, Black women and their efforts were overlooked and ignored. Jones dared to challenge the exploitation of Black women in domestic roles.

For many in the communist party, having domestic assistance in the form of maids or cooks was seen as a symbol of the Bourgeoisie class, but would not consider it the same exploitation if the domestic employee was a Black woman.<sup>49</sup> Jones made sure to reinforce to white women that the “economic relationship of Negro women to white women” would remain

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<sup>46</sup> Dawson, 26.

<sup>47</sup>Denise Lynn, “Socialist Feminism and Triple Oppression: Claudia Jones and African American Women in American Communism.” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 8, no. 2 (2014): 2  
<https://doi.org/10.14321/jstudradi.8.2.0001>

<sup>48</sup> Lynn, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Davis, 99.

in name only and not for an equal partnership until white women were able to see people employed in domestic service as providing just as valid a service and occupation as train conductors and industrial laborers.<sup>50</sup> In a situation of gender analysis, women working outside of the home, like an expectation for many women in the leftist movements as they are to be considered contributing to society, would be unable to maintain the standard of housekeeping as traditionally imposed on women, and so must decide whether to use outside help or forgo outside expectations of how domestic duties must be unkempt.<sup>51</sup> For many, it would be an easier solution to turn to external assistance and underpay someone else, often a Black woman, who would have been seen as having no other job options due to the racism prevalent in other industries, rather than fall behind on their own work or remain at home full time.<sup>52</sup> The class distinction of women taking care of their own homes as a point of privilege versus the expectation of Black women to be working for others as well as their own families was consistently overlooked by white feminists and leftists, only to be consistently discussed among Black female circles.<sup>53</sup>

## **Conclusion**

While Johnson had approached her political efforts from 1910 to 1919 with the goal to make the lives of those like her better, her aims regarding intersectionality fell short. She was successful at spreading news about the SLP through her organizing efforts on tour around the nation, and her numerous advocacy efforts with newly minted voters. Additionally, she was able to turn the *Weekly People* into a more streamlined and efficient publication. No longer did women in politics, especially among the left, seem like an impossible feat.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>52</sup> Davis, 128.

<sup>53</sup> Davis, 132.

## Appendix Images

## THE WOMAN QUESTION

Some Important Books  
on the Subject Which  
Serious Thinkers  
Should Read

WOMAN UNDER SOCIAL- ISM—Bebel; translated by Daniel De Leon; cloth	\$1.00
WOMAN, HER POSITION AND INFLUENCE IN ANCIENT GREECE AND ROME—James Donaldson; cloth	1.60
WOMAN AND ECONOM- ICS—Charlotte P. Colman; cloth	1.50
WOMAN AND SOCIAL PROGRESS—Scott Near- ing; cloth	1.50
WOMAN IN MODERN SO- CIETY—Earl Barnes; cloth	1.25
WOMAN AND LABOR— Olive Schreiner; cloth	1.25
WOMEN, SUBJECTION OF —John Stuart Mill, cloth	.60
WOMAN SUFFRAGE—Dan- iel De Leon; paper	.10
WOMAN AND THE SO- CIALIST MOVEMENT— Olive M. Johnson; paper	.05

Postage extra—20% west, and  
10% east of Chicago, except  
Bebel's "Woman under Socialism"  
and pamphlets.

**N. Y. LABOR NEWS CO.**  
45 Rose St. New York

A. The "Woman Question" Publications

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