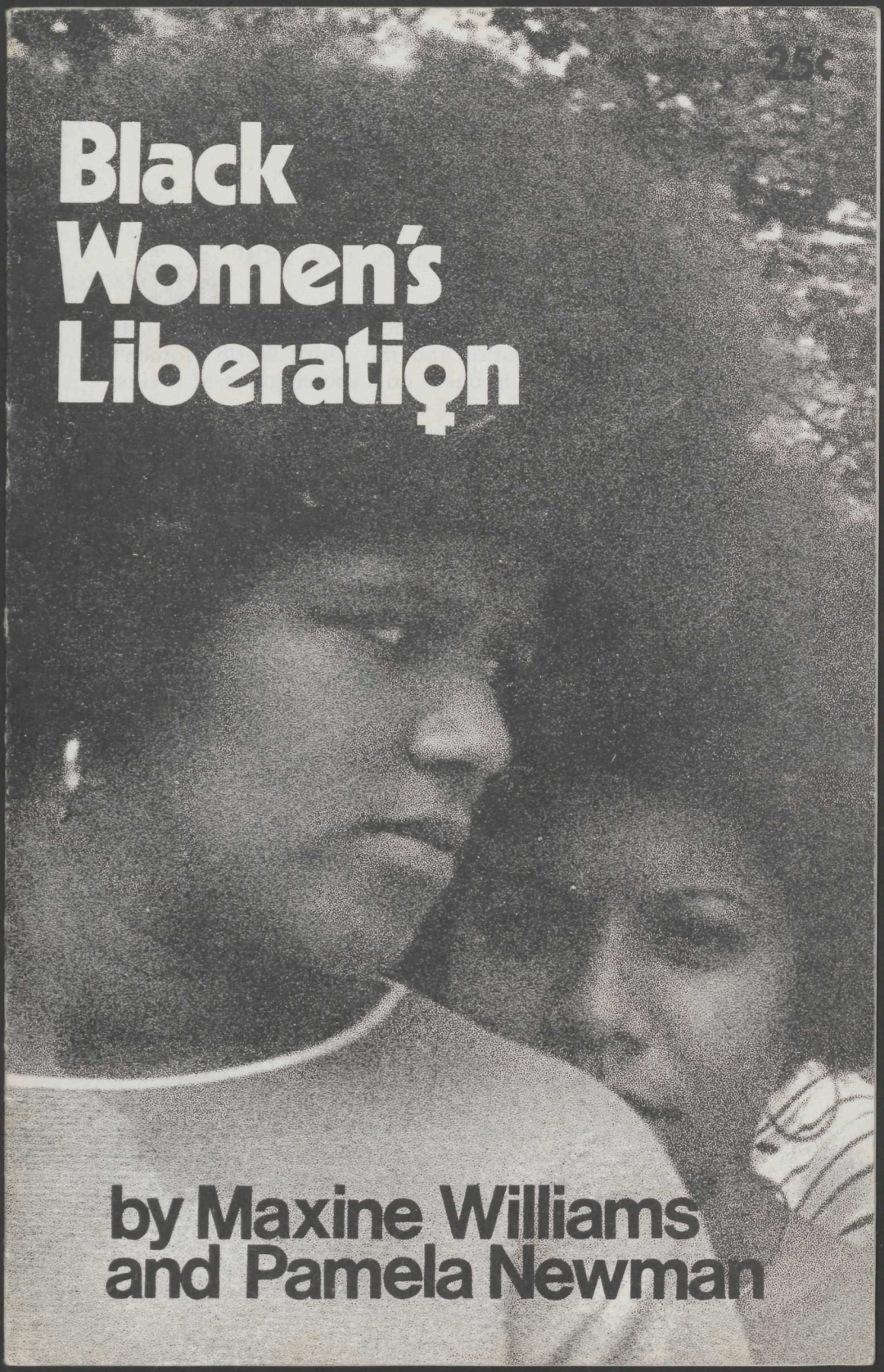
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Black
Women's
Liberation
by Maxine Williams
and Pamela Newman

Maxine Williams is a member of the New York City Young Socialist Alliance and the Third World Women's Alliance. Her article is based on a speech given at a class on women's liberation.

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Why Women's Liberation Is Important to Black Women

by Maxine Williams

In the early part of the sixties, social scientists became more and more interested in the family structure of blacks. Unemployment and so-called crime among blacks was increasing, and some of these "scientists" decided that the problems of the black community were caused by the family pattern among black people.

Since blacks were deviating from the "norm"—more female heads of households, higher unemployment, more school "dropouts"—these pseudoscientists claimed that the way to solve these problems was to build up a more stable black family in accord with the American patriarchal pattern.

In 1965, the U. S. government published a booklet entitled *The Negro Family— The Case for National Action.* The author (U. S. Dept. of Labor) stated, "In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole."

According to this theory, the institution of slavery led to a breakdown in the black family and the development of a so-called matriarchy, in which the black woman was "dominant." This "matriarchal" structure was held responsible, in turn, for contributing to the "emasculation" of the black man. In other words, as these people would have it, the oppression of black people was partly caused by the chief victims of this oppression, black women!

This myth of the black matriarchy has had widespread influence and is even widely believed in the black community today. It is something we have to fight against and expose. To show just how wrong this theory is, let's look at the real condition and history of the so-called dominant black woman.

Under slavery, once arriving on American soil, the African social order of black people was broken down. Tribes were separated and shipped to different plantations. Slaves underwent a process of desocialization and had to adopt a new culture and language.

Up until 1840, black men greatly outnumbered black women. Sociologist E. F. Frazier indicates, in his book *The Negro Family in the U. S.,* that this probably led to "numerous cases of sex relations between Negro slaves and indentured white women." The "marriage" rate between black men and white women became so high that interracial "marriages" were banned.

Prior to this time, black men were encouraged to "marry" white women in order to enrich the slavemaster's plantation with more human labor. The black man in some instances was able to select a mate of his choice. However, in contrast, the black woman had little choice in the selection of her mate. Living in a patriarchal society, she became a mere breeding instrument.

Just as black men were chained and branded under slavery, so were black women. Lying nude on the slave ship, some women gave birth to children in the scorching hot sun.

There were economic interests involved in the black woman having as many offspring as she could bear. After her child was born, she was allowed to nurse and fondle the infant only at the slavemaster's discretion. There are cases of black women who greatly resisted being separated from their children and having them placed on the auction block, even though they were subject to flogging. And in some cases, the black woman took the lives of her own children rather than submit them to the oppression of slavery.

There are those who say that because the black woman was in charge of caring for the slavemaster's children, she became an important figure in the household. Nothing

could be further from the truth. The black woman became the most exploited "member" of the master's household. She scrubbed the floors, washed dishes, cared for the children and was often subjected to the lustful advances of Miss Ann's husband. She became an unpaid domestic. However, she worked outside as well.

Still today many black women continue to work in households as underpaid domestics. And as W. E. B. Du Bois stated in his essay *The Servant in the House,* "The personal degradation of their work is so great that any white man of decency would rather cut his daughter's throat than let her grow up to such a destiny."

In this way arose the "mammy" image of black women — an image so embedded in the system that its impact is still felt today. Until recently, the mass media has aided in reinforcing this image, portraying a black woman as weighing 200 pounds, holding a child to her breast, and/or scrubbing floors with a rag around her head. For such a one, who was constantly portrayed with her head to the floor and her behind facing the ceiling, it is ludicrous to conceive of any dominant role.

Contrary to popular opinion, all black women do not willingly submit to the sexual advances of white men. Probably every black woman has been told the old myth that the only ones who have had sexual freedom in this country are the white man and the black woman. But in many instances, even physical force has been used to compel black women to submit. Frazier gives a case in his book where a black woman who refused the sexual advances of a white man was subdued and held to the ground by black men while the "master" stood there whipping her.

In some instances, black women stood in awe of the white skin of their masters and felt that copulation with a white man would enhance her slave status. There was also the possibility that her mulatto offspring would achieve emancipation. Her admiration of white skin was not very different from the slave mentality of some blacks which caused them to identify with their masters.

In some cases, the black woman who submitted herself sexually played a vital role in saving the life of the black man. If she gave the master a "good lovin'," she could

sometimes prevent her husband from being horsewhipped or punished.

The myth that is being perpetuated in the black community states that somehow the black woman has managed to escape much of the oppression of slavery and that all avenues of opportunity were opened to her. Well, this is highly interesting, since in 1870 when the Fifteenth Amendment guaranteed citizens the right to vote, this right did not apply to the black woman.

During Reconstruction those blacks who served as justices of the peace and superintendents of education, and in municipal and state governments, were men. Although the Reconstruction period was far from being an era of "black rule," it is estimated that thousands of black men used their votes to help keep the Republicans in power. The black women remained on the outside.

To be sure, the black man had a difficult time exercising his right to vote. Mobs of whites waited for him at the voting booth. Many were threatened with the loss of jobs and subjected to the terror of Klan elements. The political activity for the black man was relatively ephemeral, but while it lasted, many offices for the first time were occupied by them.

The loose ties established between black men and women during slavery were in many cases dissolved after emancipation. In order to test their freedom, some black men who remained with their wives began flogging them. Previously, this was a practice reserved only for the white master.

In the late 1860s and early 1870s, female heads of households began to crop up. Black men who held jobs as skilled craftsmen, carpenters, etc., were being driven out of these occupations. Since the Republicans no longer needed the black vote after 1876, the "welfare" of blacks was placed in southern hands. Black men found it very difficult to obtain jobs and, in some instances, found employment only as strikebreakers. Black men, who were made to feel "less of a man" in a racist oppressive system, turned toward black women and began to blame them for the position they occupied.

The black woman, in some cases left to herself with children to feed, also went looking for employment. Many

went to work in the white man's kitchen. Du Bois in the same essay mentioned earlier, *The Servant in the House,* gives a vivid portrayal of the exploitation of domestic workers. He speaks of the personal degradation of their work, the fact that they are still in some instances made to enter and exit by the side door, that they are referred to by their first name, paid extremely low wages and subjected to the sexual exploitation of the "master."

All of this proves that because the black woman worked, it did not make her more "independent" than the white woman. Rather she became more subject to the brutal exploitation of capitalism — as black, as worker, as woman.

I mentioned earlier that after emancipation, black men had a difficult time obtaining employment, that after emancipation he was barred from many of the crafts he had been trained in under slavery. The labor market for black women also proved to be a disaster. Black women entered the needle trades in New York in the 1900s, as a cheap source of labor for the employers; and in Chicago in 1917, black women, who were willing to work for lower wages, were used to break a strike.

There was great distrust between black and white workers, and in some cities, white workers refused to work beside black women and walked off their jobs.

The black woman has never held high status in this society. Under slavery she was mated like cattle and used as a mere breeding instrument. Today, the majority of black women are still confined to the most menial and lowest-paid occupations — domestic and laundry workers, file clerks, counter workers and other service occupations. These jobs in most cases are not yet unionized.

Today at least 20 percent of black women are employed as private household workers, and their median income is $1,200. These women have the double exploitation of first doing drudgery in someone else's home and then having to take care of their own households as well. Some are forced to leave their own children without adequate supervision in order to earn money by taking care of someone else's children.

Sixty-one percent of black married women were in the labor force in 1966. Almost one-fourth of black families are headed by females, double the percentage for whites.

Due to the shortage of black men, most black women are forced to accept a relationship on male terms. In black communities there sometimes exists a type of serial polygamy—a situation where many women share the same man, one at a time.

As if black women did not have enough to contend with—being exploited economically as a worker, being used as a source of cheap labor because she is a female and being treated even worse because she is black—she also finds herself fighting the beauty "standards" of a white Western society.

Years ago it was a common sight to see black women wearing blond wigs and rouge, the object being to get as close to the white beauty standard as one possibly could. But, in spite of the fact that bleaching creams and hair straighteners were used, the trick just didn't work. Her skin was still black instead of fair and her hair kinky instead of straight. She was constantly being compared to the white woman, and she was the antithesis of what was considered beautiful. Usually when she saw a black man with a white woman, the image she had of herself became even more painful.

But now "black is beautiful," and the black woman is playing a more prominent role in the movement. But there is a catch! She is still being told to step back and let the black man come forward and lead. It is ironic that at a time when all talents and abilities should be utilized to aid in the struggle of national liberation, Stokely Carmichael comes along and declares that the position of women in the movement should be "prone."

And some years later, Eldridge Cleaver in referring to the status of women said they had "pussy power." Since then, the Black Panther Party has somewhat altered its view, saying "women are our other half."

When writing their political statement, the Republic of New Africa stated they wanted the right of all black men to have as many wives as they can afford. This was based on their conception that this is the way things were in Africa. (In their publication, *The New Africa,* written in December 1969, one of the points in their Declaration of Independence seeks "to assure equality of rights for the sexes." Whether this means that the black woman

would be allowed to have as many husbands as she can afford, I have no way of knowing.)

So today the black woman still finds herself up the creek. She feels that she must take the nod from "her man," because if she "acts up," then she just might lose him to a white woman. She must still subordinate herself, her own feelings and desires, especially when it comes to the right of having control of her own body.

When the birth-control pill first came into use, it was experimentally tested on Puerto Rican women. It is therefore not surprising that Third World people look at this example and declare that both birth control and abortion are forms of genocide—devices to eliminate Third World people.

However, what is at issue is the right of women to control their own bodies. Enforced motherhood is a form of male supremacy; it is reactionary and brutal. During slavery, the plantation masters forced motherhood on black women in order to enrich their plantations with more human labor.

It is women who must decide whether they wish to have children or not. Women must have the right to control their own bodies. And this means that we must also speak out against forced sterilization and against compelling welfare mothers to accept contraceptive methods against their will.

There is now a women's liberation movement growing in the United States. By and large, black women have not played a prominent role in this movement. This is due to the fact that many black women have not yet developed a feminist consciousness. Black women see their problem mainly as one of national oppression.

The middle-class mentality of some white women in the movement has also helped to make the issue of women's liberation seem to be irrelevant to black women's needs. For instance, at the November 1969 Congress to Unite Women in New York, some of the participants did not want to take a stand against the school tracking system, that is, the system school authorities use to channel students into certain types of occupations on the basis of their so-called intelligence. These women feared that "good" students thrown in with "bad" ones would cause the "bril-

liant" students to leave school, thus lowering the standards. One white woman had the gall to mention to me that she felt women living in Scarsdale were more oppressed than Third World women trapped in the ghetto. There was also little attempt to deal with the problems of poor women, for example, the fact that women in Scarsdale exploit black women as domestics.

The movement must take a clearer stand against the horrendous conditions in which poor women are forced to work. Some women in the movement are in favor of eliminating the state protective laws for women, that is, the laws which regulate women's working conditions. But poor women who are forced to work in sweatshops, factories and laundries need those laws on the books. Not only must the state protective laws for women remain on the books, but we must see that they are enforced and made even stronger. I do not mean that those laws which are so "protective" that women are protected right out of a job should be kept. But any laws that better the working conditions for women should be strengthened, and extended to men!

Women in the women's liberation movement assert that they are tired of being slaves to their husbands, confined to the household performing menial tasks. While the black woman can sympathize with this view, she does not feel that breaking her ass every day from nine to five is any form of liberation.

She has always had to work. Before the Emancipation Proclamation, she worked in the fields of the plantation, as Malcolm X put it, "from can't see in the morning until can't see at night."

And what is liberation under this system? Never owning what you produce, you are forced to become a mere commodity on the labor market. Workers are never secure, and their length of employment is subject to the ups and downs in the economy.

Women's liberation must relate to these problems. What is hampering it now is not the fact that it is still composed of mainly white, "middle-class" women. Rather it is the failure to engage in enough of the type of actions that would draw in and link up with the masses of women not yet in the movement, including working and Third World

women. Issues such as day care, support for the striking telephone workers, support for the laws which improve working conditions for women and the campaign to free Joan Bird are steps in the right direction. (Joan Bird is one of the New York Black Panther members, who was unjustly held in jail for months awaiting trial, because of the excessively high bond demanded by the courts.)

I don't feel, however, that white women sitting around a room, browbeating one another for their "racism," saying, "I'm a racist, I'm a racist," as some women have done, is doing a damn thing for the black woman. What is needed is action.

Women's liberation must not isolate itself from the masses of women or the Third World community. At the same time, white women cannot speak for black women. Black women must speak for themselves.

The Third World Women's Alliance has been formed in New York to begin to do this. We felt there was a need for a revolutionary black women's movement to speak to the oppression of black women as blacks, as workers, as women. We are involved in reading, discussion, consciousness-raising and taking action.

We feel that black women will have a difficult time relating to the more bitter antimale sentiment in the women's liberation movement, fearing that it will be a device to keep black men and women fighting among themselves and diverting their energies from the real enemy. Many black women realize it will take both men and women to wage an effective struggle. However, this does not negate the necessity of women building our own movement, because we must build our struggle now and continue it after the revolution if we are to achieve real emancipation.

When the Third World woman begins to recognize the depth of her oppression, she will move to form alliances with all revolutionary forces available and settle for nothing less than complete destruction of this racist, capitalist, male-dominated system.

Take a Good Look at Our Problems

by Pamela Newman

When women's liberation is mentioned, there are often two reactions. One is that this is just a bunch of frustrated women who are going to separate themselves from men. The other is that this is something that is a white thing, which doesn't concern black women.

The truth is that the exploitation of black women goes deeper than that of white women. Unity of all black women is needed to push for such demands as self-determination, equal pay, free abortion and child-care centers. We should realize the need for the women of the black nation to have a liberation movement of women as part of our movement for total liberation of our people.

The black man has been led to believe that office and skilled jobs are given to the black woman by the white capitalists to make the black man feel inferior. In reality, there aren't enough jobs for everyone, and the black woman suffers the most from low pay and unemployment.

When our men get jobs where they make enough to keep a family, they often insist that the woman's place is in the home with the children. But raising children can be done just as well by the man as the woman. Because a woman is able to have babies doesn't mean she knows more about caring for them and raising them.

The very idea that women are here on earth just for having children isn't true either. We have minds and have the right to determine what we do and say. Child rearing should be a profession, not an automatic duty.

Usually black children are taken care of by older women who can't find other work. As a result, the children are separated from other children because these women aren't able to take care of more than one or two children. The mother often has to run home from work to take the child off the older woman's hands. There are no facilities for child care in the black community and few qualified people to take care of teaching the children in a progressive manner.

Ask yourself, have you ever been told, this is a man's conversation, so be quiet or keep out because woman's work is only dishwashing, sewing or laundry. This, my sisters, is male chauvinism, not by the system but by the brothers because of the illusions that capitalism has produced.

How many of you sisters come home from work and have to cook dinner and clean the house, and if the brother comes in before you finish, he immediately gets angry because you are not in the best mood. Somehow we must make him understand that we are human as much as he is. We aren't tools of pleasure to be called to his side and put down if we dare not come.

Just look at the newspaper ads, how they use sex to sell products, and also use race. Before the rise of black power, you never saw a product for black people. But they did have lighteners and brighteners on the market to make women look "beautiful." Not until it was profitable could you buy a bush comb, bush wig or Afro-Sheen. Most of these black products are for women because of their general lack of a strong sense of worth and dignity, which makes women more exploitable than men and better consumers.

And don't you think it is wrong that women who can't afford to keep their children have no say in where their child is sent? Isn't it wrong that after a certain number of "illegal" children, you are sterilized without your permission? Don't you think that we should have community control of abortion hospitals in our communities?

No doubt you or almost anyone can somehow get an abortion, but it is either expensive or risky. It would be nice to see the day when we have free abortion by recognized doctors in the community. But with hospital costs

what they are now, and with most of us making only about $75 a week, we can't afford this.

Why not lower the cost of medical care or make it free? Reason: the system of medical care would cut the profits of all the companies, including the drug companies. The system wouldn't want Bayer Aspirin or Excedrin or any other company that makes drugs and sells them at ridiculously high rates to be unhappy. But still people are dying in the black community without the care they desperately need, and children are being brought up in conditions that some rats would turn down.

It is time that we started struggles against every aspect of our oppression.

Take a look at our problems: medical care, housing, jobs, police repression, child care, abortion . . . To solve these problems we need to gain control of our communities. We have to stop letting our communities be controlled by white, rich politicians and capitalists. We can't go on voting for the two parties controlled by these dictators. Both parties protect not the interest of the people but the white ruling class which controls the economic system. For the total liberation of our people, we need an independent black political party which we can control.

With the demand for self-determination, we are demanding total control of everything that affects our lives. Is it wrong to ask for the right to make the decisions affecting the lives of your children and yourself? If you think so, then you are against women's liberation, black liberation and democracy.

It is very important that black women's groups be formed now, because the capitalists are not going to give money out of their pockets to finance twenty-four-hour child-care centers and meet our other needs. A black women's liberation group would also bring out other demands directly related to women, such as welfare. They could fight for new clothes and for free food which is not surplus but fresh meat and other products which are good for the body.

This money-greedy ruling class can't and won't give us free medical care and other necessities. The only way to get these things is to fight for them. In the process of this fight, many women will begin to realize that our struggle is

against capitalism and imperialism. We should be dedicated to building a socialist society inside the United States where profits would be outlawed and the total means of production and distribution placed in the hands of the working class. That struggle must be led by black people, who are concerned about the humanity of this world.

The revolutionary vanguard of America will be the black nation. The total working class must be liberated, including the women, and of course the black woman shall have to be liberated *first* because of the multi-oppression which she suffers.

All over the world, black and Third World people have stopped turning their cheeks. We need to organize to struggle against every aspect of our oppression. Black women's liberation could not and will not be a diversion from the liberation of our people. The organization of black women to fight for our needs as well as the needs of all black people will help intensify the struggle.

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Further Reading

Readings in women's liberation from Pathfinder Press:

BOOKS

The Mod Donna and Scyklon Z: Plays of Women's Liberation
Myrna Lamb — cl$5.95/pb$2.25

Problems of Women's Liberation
Evelyn Reed — cl$3.95/pb$1.45

PAMPHLETS

Black Women's Liberation
Maxine Williams, Pamela Newman — .25

In Defense of the Women's Movement
Ruthann Miller, Evelyn Reed, Mary-Alice Waters — .25

Pioneers of Women's Liberation
Joyce Cowley — .25

The Politics of Women's Liberation Today
Mary-Alice Waters — .25

Revolutionary Dynamics of Women's Liberation
George Novack — .25

Sisterhood Is Powerful
Betsey Stone — .25

Women and the Cuban Revolution
Linda Jenness, Fidel Castro — .35

Women and the Equal Rights Amendment
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Women and the Family
Leon Trotsky — .75

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