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Violence and the "Revolutionary" Times of the Black Panther Party

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We all tend to forget how deeply we are influenced by our biographies. However, too often our reflections on history are colored by the preoccupations of the present. While this is perhaps unavoidable, we cannot allow the conservatism of the post-1960s "backlash" to expunge the context within which the Black Panther Party (BPP) operated. Only by grasping the drama of that historical moment can one understand the role that violence played in the origins, nature, and development of one of the most misunderstood movements of modern times.

The 1960s was a period of world revolution. The insurrectionary mood of the common people tempered the corrosive and socially degrading power of corporate capitalism, and boldly challenged the presumptions of a global white supremacy. People of color all over the world rose up to claim their place in the human family as full and respected members of the world community. That rising – of what was called the "dark world" – was heralded by Malcolm X as "the end of white world supremacy."[1] Malcolm pointed out that the black revolution in the United States was not the rebellion of a minority, but a part of the worldwide struggle of the oppressed against the oppressor. The great Chinese revolutionary, Mao Zedong, agreed. He argued that the evil system of imperialism began with the enslavement of the Negro people, and it would surely end with the complete liberation of the Black people.[2] The Black Panther Party was thus part of a larger movement that illuminated the landscape with its fresh understanding of the world and a vision that ordinary people who had been victims of the most ruthless

exploitation and degradation could collectively create a world that was egalitarian, democratic, and just. However, the Panthers' heroic and sometimes foolish actions brought down the full power of American imperialism's iron fist on their collective necks, while their more moderate cohorts were courted and seduced into working on behalf of integrating black people into the system.

Of course, the Panthers worked "within the system" from the very beginning: lawfully carrying guns as they "patrolled the police," lobbying for street lights at dangerous intersections, running for state and national office on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket, organizing "survival programs pending revolution," registering black people to vote. Indeed, their electoral strategy in Oakland in the 1970s would culminate in the election of the first black mayor in the city's history.[3] But, again, all this must be seen within the proper historical context. We must situate these phenomena in the context of what Henry Luce dubbed the American Century, characterized in part by a mature global liberalism that promised the spread of the Good and then the Great Society to all Americans and eventually to all in the world who followed America's example and direction. At the same time, the civil rights movement sounded the central themes of democratization, equal rights, and social justice. Martin Luther King, for example, skillfully articulated a vision of the American Dream that captured the imaginations of tens of millions of Americans of all colors and creeds. His challenge that America live up to its professions was thus viewed by many as the final push that would inspire Americans to complete the great, unfinished American Revolution. For his part, Malcolm X was skeptical; he had listened carefully to the voices of millions of Black people who lived outside the Jim Crow South, yet who were deeply alienated from the

white mainstream. Malcolm helped called the attention of the nation to these marginalized masses by speaking in their voice, and helping them to speak in their own voice. Ultimately, the eloquence of these voices, with the voices of "the barefoot people in the jungles of Vietnam," drew King closer to Malcolm's view. And, King would say toward the end of his life that the operations of American power was a nightmarish ordeal for the world's have-nots and for many of the most disadvantaged people of color within America's national borders. [4]

Meanwhile, even in the early 1960s, during the most idealistic period of America's global liberalism, the youthful rebels of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) were arguing for a radical democratization of society. Then, the rebellion against American hegemony manifested in struggles in Vietnam, Algeria, Cuba, China, Ghana, Guinea, and other parts of three continents, combined with the struggle of oppressed strata within the national borders of the United States, to undermine the largesse of the liberal state. The *rapports de force* had shifted decisively in favor of the colonized, semi-colonized, dependent zones of the world-economy occupied in the main by people of color. Not only Malcolm and SDS, but the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and King himself, along with a host of others activist organizations and leaders, called for solidarity with the revolutionaries of the three continents. And more: they urged Americans themselves to become a part of this elemental rebellion.

In the more conservative atmosphere of neo-liberal globalization and the neo-conservative Project for a New American Century, it may be easy to forget, even difficult to comprehend, a time when subaltern groups across the globe challenged the American

hegemone, with many by the late sixties believing victory was within sight. But, what was truly remarkable about this period was the depth of support within the United States for these movements arrayed in opposition to its own ruling class. This kind of internationalism had been a regular feature of large sections of the Black freedom struggle and of the world socialist movement throughout the century. But, now it was the dominant position of large sections of the population of the hegemonic power.

"All society was a battleground," says Max Elbaum about this moment in the opening pages of his new book, *Revolution is in the Air*.[5] Here, he captures the essence of this period by pointing out that the power of the post-1968 New Left stemmed in part from their all-important recognition "that the power of the oppressed was on the rise and the strength of the status quo was on the wane."[6] By the fall of 1968, one million students saw themselves as part of the Left, and 368,000 people agreed on the need for a mass revolutionary party. Among African Americans, revolutionary sentiments contended not just for influence, but for pre-eminence, especially among those under 30, as more than 300 rebellions flared up among inner-city Blacks from 1964 to1968. Then, with Richard Nixon's brutal invasion of Cambodia in May 1970, came the largest explosion of protest on college campuses in the nation's history. *Business Week* lamented at the time, "the invasion of Cambodia and the senseless shooting of four students at Kent State University in Ohio have consolidated the academic community against the war, against business, and against government. This is a dangerous situation. It threatens the whole economic and social structure of the nation."[7] By the early 1970s, polls reported that upwards of forty percent of college students – nearly three million of

them – and a majority of young blacks thought a revolution was necessary in the United States.

The foregoing is the necessary background for understanding the meaning and significance of both C.B. Stain's "From the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense to the Black Panther Party: Self-Defense, Revolution, and the Black Panthers in Oakland," and Bridgette Baldwin's "Under the Shadow of the Gun: The Black Panther Party, the Ninth Amendment, and the Discourse of Self-Defense." For his part, Strain presents us with a quite bold thesis that the initial self-defense activities of the Panthers were in the tradition of the Deacons for Defense and the rifle clubs proposed by Malcolm X, but not in the traditions of social revolution. Instead, he locates the Panthers within the traditions and political culture of United States, and thus establishes them as a reasonable and legitimate force. He argues that their creation was a response to white racist violence, specifically that of the police, against Black people. Thus, rather than starting out as revolutionaries, "the Panthers *became* revolutionary when their goals surpassed the politics of self-defense and they began to talk openly about re-ordering American society (emphasis added)."

Strain argues that the repression of the Black Panther Party was a function of its claim to a legitimate use of violence that went beyond self-defense. For Strain, this claim overstepped the bounds of the legal and ethical norms of U.S. society. Still, he finds it understandable, since it was based on the norms of an inner-city adolescent tradition that justified pre-emptive attacks as more effective when a fight was imminent. This focus on social psychology is a helpful insight, but might it, at the same time, divert the author's attention from a racist society in which a deeply entrenched ideological racism so

distorted one's sense of ethics and morality inner-city Blacks become not only suspect but also guilty? Quite often, this view was shared by local police officers, federal security agents, and much of the white public. While Strain considers the logic of BPP attempts to redefine these norms, he does not resolve the tensions over how inner-city residents and the white public differed in their views of this issue.

For Strain, this may simply be a matter of describing and analyzing the way the BPP engaged with this issue. But, the question of redefinition of norms is a central question for revolutionary movements, even if they approach the issue by using to a set of common legal, ethical, and moral norms. The police claim to the legitimate use of force is quite different from that of vigilante-type groups, such as those who have engaged in lynching and attacks on Black urban communities in the past. The Black Panther Party was a revolutionary movement, even if they saw as part of their task the defense of a community (not just individuals) whose inhabitants were subject to arbitrary, discriminatory, abusive, and often murderous treatment by law enforcement officials. In academic parlance, the issue of redefinition was central during this period of profound and fundamental social change, which was the objective of the Black Panther Party. The following excerpt from the March 23, 1968 issue of *The Black Panther*, quoted by Strain, captures precisely the change in *rapports de force* that the Black Panther Party sought.

> HALT IN THE NAME OF HUMANITY! YOU SHALL MAKE NO MORE WAR ON UNARMED PEOPLE. YOU WILL NOT KILL ANOTHER BLACK PERSON AND WALK THE STREETS OF THE BLACK COMMUNITY TO GLOAT ABOUT IT AND SNEER AT THE DEFENSELESS RELATIVES OF YOUR VICTIMS. FROM NOW ON, WHEN YOU MURDER A BLACK PERSON IN THIS BABYLON OF BABYLONS, YOU MAY AS WELL GIVE IT UP BECAUSE WE WILL GET YOUR ASS AND GOD CAN'T HIDE YOU.

While Strain sees this statement as an explosion of the conventional notion of self-defense to include the socially inadmissible concepts of retaliation and revenge, one might ask, in what kind of world is this statement not morally and ethically sound? Whether or not this is a conventional notion of self-defense seems less important than its consistency with any commonsense notion of the rights of people to self-preservation.

Critical here is that the BPP viewed the local police as an occupying army, and, during this period, the Black community as a domestic colony of the U.S. imperialist social order entitled to the right of self-determination. Without a historical sense of that political analysis, one cannot grasp the BPP as an organized force with an evolving political line and social practice. Here, the standard academic analysis of social movements, which seek the basis of social practice in its members and their own everyday practice, cannot capture the essence of the Panther project. To be sure, scholars and the general middle class public do need to understand the social psychology that made violence appear a legitimate tactic for the BPP, even when used in intra-organizational conflict. But, part of that historical phenomenon was precisely the result of the FBI's COINTELPRO strategy of fomenting that very violence.[8]

Finally, the reliance on a commonsense distinction between an admissible "defensive" strategy and an unacceptable "offensive" strategy risks losing sight of what Fernand Braudel calls, "social time," the consideration of which is very much the stuff of which historical and social analysis is composed. That is, denoting "the aggressor" must move beyond a particular situation in an immediate present. For the Panthers consistently cast the issue of community self-defense in what might be called a middle-

run or even long-term perspective. That perspective must be part of our larger historical reconceptualization of what the Panthers themselves sought to accomplish.

One strikingly original way of doing that can be found in the legal and social analysis of the lawyer-turned-professor, Bridgette Baldwin, whose thesis mirrors the originality and daring of the Black Panther Party. Her essay skillfully documents how the Party built its case for the "right of revolution" on the basis of the anti-colonial struggle waged by the United States itself against the British, as well as what she views as the Constitutional guarantee to the right of self defense. But, her evidence and argument go further: she has suggested that when the Panthers undertook a revolutionary struggle on behalf of the aggrieved African-American population of the United States, they did so on Constitutional grounds. She effects this striking thesis by looking broadly at the program of the Black Panther Party, in the context of the conditions under which the African- American people lived during the 1960s and 1970s. Her argument that the period 1967 to 1970 was one of intense repression of Black communities in which the Black Panther Party legitimately exercised their right to defend the Black community illuminates how they operated solidly within the American grain, although adding a vibrant and transformative stripe to that American grain. Such are among those "inalienable rights" articulated in the Declaration of Independence, and only when oppressed groups have fought for these rights have they been achieved.

Baldwin thus captures a crucial dimension of the Panthers' self-defense activities: they sought street credibility with urban Black youth and later with third world revolutionaries. While she recognizes that such activities carried a cost – e.g., the white mainstream viewing them as obsessed with irrational violence – she also notes that the

Panther leadership had adopted weapons in part as an organizing strategy. Thus, she quotes Panther Chairman Bobby Seale on the relationship between picking up the gun and social revolution. "We knew that at first the guns would be more valuable and more meaningful to the brothers on the block, for drawing them into the organization."

Baldwin's close attention to the BPP's arsenal of strategy and tactics allow her to point out that the Panthers used pragmatic and individualist rhetoric that both accessed and critiqued the language of the Constitution. They thus considered their approach to the U.S. and local governing authorities as "absolutely legal," she reminds us. Indeed, the BPP legal framework must be understood as but one component of their overarching goal of anticolonial revolution, a revolution they portrayed as one that closely tracked the American Revolution itself. For, though the American resistance to British colonialism often took the form of non-violent resistance, "they also engaged in acts of violent resistance, explicitly understood as self-defense."

While some argue that Panthers became more reformist after they dropped "Self Defense" from their organizational name, Baldwin seems to agree with those who argue that the concept of self-defense was expanded in the process. In this context, the so-called "survival programs" could be seen a defense against various kinds of violence, such as massive black unemployment or inadequate health care. The Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention (RPCC) was set in Philadelphia in 1970 deliberately as a symbolical return to the scene of the original sanctioning of the second-class citizenship of the African-American people. Although the RPCC did not succeed in altering the U.S. Constitution, it did set the stage for subsequent strategies for fundamental change within the United States. The efforts of the BPP, like no other

organization, thus revealed the contradictory status of democracy within the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. But what is most remarkable and revealing about Baldwin's thesis is that the BPP participated *legally* in the system, leaving a critical legacy for Black people and for Americans generally.[9]

The brutality of Jim Crow system as a system of social control of African Americans caused both resistance (the civil rights movement) and flight (migration to the north, Midwest, and west coast). But, those who migrated to escape Jim Crow did not find the "Promised Land" but another system of social control: the Black Ghetto.[10] Although the northern, western, and Midwestern ghettoes were less rigid than the Jim Crow system of the South, they were no less constricting and all encompassing. But the Ghetto was a double-edged sword, for while it constrained those southerners of African descent who migrated to the North, it also concentrated them in such a way that forced them to build their own institutions much more broadly and enhanced their sense of being a "nation within a nation." It was this social situation that fostered the historical evolution of the New Negro Movement, which gave us the Garvey movement, the African Blood Brotherhood (a group much like the BPP), the *Messenger*, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Nation of Islam. Later, the civil rights movement would emerge in the South and capture the support and imaginations of people around the nation, and in many other parts of the world. The southern civil rights movement dramatically altered the *rapports de force* within the U.S. in favor of an insurgent Black population, whose radicalism deepened as the spirit of the civil rights movement led to a revival of the radical nationalist movements that had so often inhabited the Black Ghettoes of the United States. At the same time, the two most prestigious leaders of African America,

Malcolm and King, articulated revolutionary solidarity with the oppressed of the three continents.

This created a unique historical conjuncture similar in many ways to the New Negro Movement of the post-World War I period and the Popular Front movements of the 1930s and 1940s (Negro National Congress, Council on African Affairs), but one in which the rearrangement of power relations favorable to the disadvantaged appeared to be stronger than ever before in American history. Because of America's preeminent world position, the movements of the 1960s seemed a prelude to the redistribution of global power called for by Malcolm and King, SNCC and the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM). At the center of this, for a time, was the Black Panther Party, who came of age precisely as the rebellion of the masses in the Black urban ghettos of the North, Midwest, and along Pacific Coast crested. More, oppressed people from all walks of life began to seek entry into this coalition. In the meantime, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover argued that the civil rights movement was the leading edge of a social revolution in this country and thus had to be destroyed.[11] By late 1968, he would place the Panthers at the head of that movement that had to be crushed.[12]

The liberal establishment that had supported a moderate civil rights agenda to that moment was politically marginalized as the ruling class responded to this threat. The right came to power under a racist (and not so new) law-and-order doctrine, because the ghettoes were no longer able to control its inhabitants of color. The story of the rise and fall of the Black Panther Party was a part of the rise of this moment of revolution and repression – the sharpest such moment in American history. The power of the people seemed everywhere on the rise, and the power of established social groups were under

challenge. The story of the Black Panther Party was inextricably intertwined with the beginning of this structural crisis of world capitalism. To its credit, the attempted to prepare oppressed strata to wage the struggle for a new historical system. That such a struggle would be a long one, the Panther leadership seems to well know, though one could have been misled by the rapid pace of events during the revolution of 1968 that the revolutionary seizure of power might come sooner rather than later. But, those were heady days, and revolutionary forces have been fooled by the pace of events in other historical periods. Marx, Engels, and Lenin all foretold the obsolescence of capitalism during their own times.

The current, on-going counter-revolution of the conservative forces does not lessen the historical significance of this revolutionary period – or of the Panthers that were at the center of it – although it has dramatically altered the momentum of the movement generally. Today, the hegemony of the conservative right has so influenced the public discourse that it is hard to imagine the power and the grandeur of that earlier moment. Moreover, we tend only to remember, and exaggerate, the mistakes made; but we should beware of assuming that we are in the midst of a long-term conservative hegemony. The disputed outcomes of both the 2000 and 2004 presidential election, the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, and the launching of pre-emptive wars are all symbols of the long-term decline of U.S. power. And, though I write in the immediate aftermath of the controversial 2004 presidential election, the controversy itself is indicative that we are on the cusp of a new day. The massive activation of the electorate on both sides, and the social and demographic trends that in fact are moving away from

the base of the conservative faction will return to the ground laid by the Black Panther Party.

While the BPP talked about the need for self-defense of the Black community, we should also beware of overemphasizing the role of violence, even "revolutionary violence," in the program of the Black Panther Party. While the willingness to use violence to defend the Black community against the attacks of the local police forces was important in reinforcing the notion that the Black community had the right to defend itself against authorities who had a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, staying the violent acts of local law enforcement agencies was in the final analysis to be achieved by political means and not by military means. For military struggle was not, in fact, the main plank of the BPP's revolutionary program. That plank was promoting the power of the people, the ability of Black communities to fight on their own behalf, and unity with other social forces. This is a lesson that we should take from the experience of the Black Panther Party into this period of transition where our efforts will be key to constructing a new historical system. With that as a lodestar, we can build the economic, political, cultural, and social institutions that will manifest our commitment to a society that places in the center of its efforts the attempt to grant "all power to the people."

ENDNOTES

[1] Malcolm X, The End of White World Supremacy, New York: Merlin House, 1971, p. 130.

[2] See Mao Zedong s statement Oppose Racial Discrimination by U.S. Imperialism, in Stuart Schram, The Political Thought of Mao Tse Tung. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969, pp. 409-412.

[3] Bush, Rod, "Oakland: Grassroots Organizing Against Reagan," in Rod Bush (ed.), *The New Black Vote: Politics and Power in Four American Cities*. San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1984, pp. 315-374.

[4] Vincent Harding, Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996, p. 18-21.

[5] Max Elbaum, Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Chef (London: Verso, 2002).

[6] Ibid., p. 2.

[7] Quoted in ibid., pp. 18-19.

[8] Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations, Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports on Intelligence Activities and the Rights of Americans, Book III, 1976, pp. 187-207.

[9] Baldwin is reminiscent of another lawyer/scholar/activist from this period – namely, Kenneth Cockrel of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Cockrel took the same kind of macro-sociological approach to analyzing the legal system, which resonated brilliantly with juries of the peers of the accused. His record of successes in trials was therefore nothing short of astounding. Bridgette Baldwin's contribution here seems to indicate promise for the rise of another such great scholar/lawyer/activist.

[10] Loic Wacquant, "Slavery to Mass Incarceration," *New Left Review*, 52, pp. 33-40., January/February 2002. 13, pp. 41-60.

[11] Kenneth O'Reilly, Racial Matters: The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960-1972. New York: Free Press, 1989, pp. 125-155; 355-359. Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations, Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports on Intelligence Activities and the Rights of Americans, Book III, 1976, pp. 81-184.

[12] Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations, Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports on Intelligence Activities and the Rights of Americans, Book III, 1976, pp. 187-188.