

Pan-African Revolt for A New Century

Case Studies of the United States, Nigeria and Haiti

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Introduction: What is Pan-Africanism? Why does it matter?

The struggles on the African continent against colonialism (both in its original format and as neo-colonialism) should always be supported by people of the diaspora. Our struggles are interconnected, and what is good for people on the African continent is good for Black people living in the imperial core. This is perhaps a moment in time when uprisings/revolts are happening all over the diaspora around the same time. A Pan-African approach to supporting revolts across the African Diaspora is necessary, and it is one of the ways that we can ensure solidarity is more than “a market exchange.” True solidarity with other oppressed peoples should be rooted in an opposition to the conditions that are producing the oppression.

Pan-Africanist thought is characterized by an understanding of Black people as a group being oppressed worldwide by imperialist exploitation. This manifests differently in different contexts, but the oppression experienced is interconnected.

Pan-Africanists of the revolutionary variety believe, to paraphrase Robin Kelley (from his introduction to CLR James’s *A History of Pan-African Revolt*), that Africa and the diaspora must unite in a coordinated effort to overthrow colonialism, racism, and ultimately capitalism.

It is imperative that African people in the United States understand our struggle as connected to struggles on the continent. Pan-Africanism matters, as we cannot allow reactionary posturing such as Ice Cube’s “Contract with Black America,” or the ADOS movement, to spread false consciousness. There cannot be any hope in Black integration into the American imperialist project. Pan-Africanist revolutionaries must push for the destruction of the United States. We must oppose any Black political project that hopes to become “American” rather than unmaking America.

Why does this piece matter?

Black people have always revolted. Black people are currently revolting. Black people will continue to revolt. The key to those revolts is understanding and honoring their mass character. It is the Black masses who ultimately bring about the conditions that make revolutionary change possible. This piece makes this idea clear and connects it to a Pan-African vision, because in reality the struggle of the Black masses is a global one. We were inspired by the revolts that took place in Haiti, Nigeria, and the United States. Furthermore, we were inspired by the Pan-African acts of solidarity and political education shared between Africans in each of these neo-colonial states. In publishing this article, we hope to build upon the ongoing work of Pan-Africanist revolutionaries, to build internationalist politics within our own communities and revolutionary milieus.

This article is also meant to serve as a critique of the Black neo-colonial elite. Black neo-colonial elites are the Black faces of empire that are trotted out to pacify revolt. There are Black neo-colonial elites serving as empire’s middle managers wherever people of the African Diaspora exist. They act as a buffer between empire and the political, social, and economic conditions created by neo-colonialism. They are clients to empire, and not invested in the liberation of their own people.

What do we mean by neo-colonialism, broadly speaking? Neo-colonialism is said to be the evolution of colonialism following the independence movements of former colonies. Empire rec-

ognizes that it cannot reverse this independence, but it can still control the former colonies' economic systems and political power — this is neo-colonialism. There is no true sovereignty for the colonized as long as the colonized are bound up in the political economy of empire.

Kwame Nkrumah, in *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism*, tells us that “in the neo-colonialist territories, since the former colonial power has in theory relinquished political control, if the social conditions occasioned by neo-colonialism cause a revolt the local neo-colonialist government can be sacrificed and another equally subservient one substituted in its place” (xiv). The theory of neo-colonialism must be applied to the struggle and class conditions in the United States although it is distinct in its form from the type of neo-colonialism discussed by Nkrumah. We mean to critique the black neo-colonial elite within the United States through utilizing the idea of the “domestic neo-colonialism” as defined by Robert L. Allen.

This is why *A History of Pan-African Revolt* holds so many valuable lessons for us and can serve as a powerful critique of the Black neo-colonial elite — it provides us tools with which we can analyze revolts across diaspora, and fully understand what is at stake. We need to be able to determine who the enemies of liberation are and how they maintain the system that keeps us from getting free.

CLR James as a theorist for our moment (A History of Pan-African Revolt)

CLR James's *A History of Pan-African Revolt* provides us with a helpful lens for thinking about the mass character of revolutionary struggles. James has a strong faith in the ability of the masses to create the conditions necessary for their own liberation, and this is a faith that we need to carry with us today.

James focuses his analysis on the masses rather than “leaders” of revolt. As Kelley explains in the Introduction:

“Of course, there are leaders, but like Toussaint L'Ouverture in San Domingo, leaders are made by the masses and the times in which they live. James makes a point of describing how the masses defend their leaders by freeing them from jail cells, hiding them in huts and cellars, pummeling their detractors into silence.” (3)

James asserted the need for Black self-determination for the true liberation of the proletariat and lumpenproletariat:

“‘Africans must win their own freedom,’ [James] insisted. ‘Nobody will win it for them.’ James had come to the conclusion that the European working-class movement could not win without the African masses (nor the latter without the former), and that only the African masses—workers, peasants, and perhaps some farsighted intellectuals—fighting on their own terms could destroy imperialism.” (14)

James learned from the failure of African states to bring about a revolutionary society following their liberation:

“First, a revolutionary society cannot be created unless the colonial state is completely dismantled. Second, the new generation of African leaders needs to create and sustain democratic institutions throughout the country. Even if those institutions are critical of the government, a new society cannot be built without them.” (28)

James realized the difficulties that the elite (even Black ones) posed for the establishment of revolutionary society. Because of this, he focused on the masses:

“While James understood the importance of dismantling the colonial state in theory, he knew in practice that the African leaders of the newly independent nations tended to be Western-educated civil servants who were products of the colonial state and thus had a personal stake in maintaining it.” (28)

The masses as a revolutionary force unto themselves

We say “the masses” because we do not want to reduce the unit of analysis to only the proletariat. We want to be thinking with the lumpenproletariat and others who have been dispossessed by racial capitalism. We want to emphasize that though Black revolt is often centered on the male proletarian subject, Black people of marginalized genders who are doing reproductive labor are central to revolts across the African diaspora. No analysis is complete without an understanding of whose labor and struggle is valued and why. We are operating from an understanding of what Joy James calls the captive maternal, “those most vulnerable to violence, war, poverty, police, and captivity; those whose very existence enables the possessive empire that claims and dispossesses them.”

Revolts cannot occur without care work; we want continually to emphasize this to the readers of our piece. That care work is made invisible by the patriarchal division of labor; so we do not see most of it on social media, as fires burn down the neo-colonial centers of power. We must expand our conceptions of what labor and actions are necessitated by revolt.

Having clarified our view of what constitutes the masses, we now turn to the implications of the actions they take. The masses have always been rooted in a material analysis of their conditions in a way that the petite bourgeoisie simply aren't. Looking back to revolts during the colonial occupation of the African continent, we see them being led not by the elites and petite bourgeoisie who were often educated in the West, but rather by the people most marginalized by colonial society. As noted by in *A History of Pan-African Revolt*: “What was needed to rid Africa of its bureaucratic petite bourgeoisie was uncompromising revolt, permanent revolution from below. The political and cultural resources for such a revolution... can be found in traditional African society.” (28)

It is worth recognizing that James does tend to romanticize pre-capitalist society, but this does not diminish his analysis. The fact that there was a world before capitalism suggests that there will be one afterwards. Traditional African cultures can still serve as a base for drawing resistance and defying colonial logics.

It is difficult for one to predict when the masses will erupt in action, but one can be sure that when they do act it is because of a particular analysis that the Black masses have of their material conditions. The Black masses are less concerned with legality and more concerned with dealing

crippling blows to concentrations of capital and the carceral infrastructure. In the United States, the Black masses have manifested new tactics to stay ahead of the repressive arms of the state. In *Cars, Riots, & Black Liberation*, Shemon and Arturo offer us insight into tactical innovations that the Black proletariat employed during revolts across the United States. They point out that leveraging cars to go on the offensive is one of the innovations that we have seen during the revolts of 2020.

Again, the Black masses create the conditions necessary for the world that revolutionaries want to see briefly creating police-free zones, because cops were scattered to the wind, trying to defend capital from looting caravans. They quite literally, as Shemon and Arturo said, “used the vastness of urban space to create a new territory of struggle.” Now is the time for us to focus on expanding that space of struggle from urban to rural spaces, and even across colonial boundaries. We will present three different case studies to illustrate the revolutionary impulse of the Black masses in the face of neocolonialism heralded by today’s neo-colonial elites.

Haiti

The Haitian struggle against racial capitalism began in earnest with the Haitian Revolution, where enslaved Africans and their allies pushed the plantation owners from the island. Since then, the European and American powers have continued to punish that small island for their resistance to the system of slavery and European/US imperialism. We have seen the Pan-African revolt renewed in Haiti over the course of 2019. As Pan-Africanists in the United States, it is critical that we focus on the revolt in Haiti against the neo-colonialists put in power by the United States government. In early 2021, the fires in Haiti began again, with the call for a General Strike coming on February 2nd. The general strike has been spurred by frustration with the current president, Jovenel Moïse, and with routine kidnappings by gangs. Importantly, the General Strike was preceded by Black autonomous rebellion against the State in Haiti. Black rebels have looted, fought police, and burned tires on roads in the capital city of Port Au Prince. The General Strike will hopefully only deepen the already existing revolt.

In February of 2019, revolt renewed against the Moïse presidency. Moïse is a US-backed dictator who is deeply embroiled in corruption scandals. His party is a neo-colonial force that is supported by the United States government. After being called to resign, he said that he would not “leave the country in the hands of armed gangs and drug traffickers,” which is similar to the anti-rioting dogwhistles of neo-colonial politicians such as Obama and Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, who claimed that the rebellion in Baltimore was the work of “thugs.” Like a good hemispheric puppet, Moïse has advanced United States imperial claims against Venezuela as well.

The Haitian National Police are funded by the US State Department. As reported on August 31st, 2020 by the Center for Economic and Policy Research:

“Earlier this month [August], the State Department notified Congress that it was reallocating \$8 million from last year’s budget to support the HNP [Haitian National Police]. Since Trump took office, the US has nearly quadrupled its support to Haiti’s — from \$2.8 million in 2016 to more than \$12.4 million last year. With the recent reallocation, the figure this year will likely be even higher. US funding for the Haitian police constitutes more than 10 percent of the institution’s overall budget.”

The security state in Haiti is completely backed by the US government. It is critical to understand the hand that the United States plays in maintaining imperialism through the security state abroad. The police are a colonial force that imposes Yankee imperialism. While the United States authorities will often attempt to differentiate police violence in the United States from police violence in places like Haiti, it is critical to understand that these phenomena are deeply connected in terms of funding streams.

Death squads like G-9 are a common force in Haitian politics. These squads, which are linked to the Moïse regime, are engaged in killings, massacres and house burnings in poor neighborhoods in Port-Au-Prince. The neighborhoods targeted by these paramilitary forces are typically neighborhoods where Lavalas (a social democratic party) is organizing. Paramilitary forces that work for US-backed regimes are a common reality wherever the US imperialism extends throughout the world. We can draw some parallels between these groups and the new paramilitary formations (far-right militias) that are gaining force in the United States as a response to Black revolt during the hot summer of 2020. Despite the United States' claims to support democracy in Haiti, the State Department was quick to denounce the rebellions in a statement where they declared that "there is no excuse for violence. Violence leads to instability, less investment, and fewer jobs." The State Department understands how threatening the rebellions in Haiti are to capitalism as they go beyond a mere appeal to "democracy" through their attacks on property and security forces.

It is critical that we, as Pan-Africanists in the United States, support and defend the revolt in Haiti as well as taking action in solidarity. The common theme of Black revolt against the police, and therefore against the State upheld by neo-colonial elites, is visible in the rest of our case studies as well.

Nigeria

Since 2017, there has been organizing to end the vicious Special Anti Robbery Squad (SARS) of the police in Nigeria; but in 2020 we have seen revolts led by the masses. The uprisings calling for an end to SARS are not just about the unit; they critique a whole society that could produce this type of violence. SARS continually exploits the Nigerian people, and is representative of the way that people are marginalized and brutalized under systems of global colonization.

Nigeria is a good example of how prisons as we know them are colonial imports. The first prison constructed in Nigeria came in 1872, long before its independence from British rule. Furthermore, the laws that structure Nigerian society then and now, that dictate who gets banished to those prisons, are themselves rooted in colonial logics. Nowhere is this clearer than in how police target, abuse and murder Black poor people, and Black people from marginalized genders and sexualities. It is those groups of people who are at the forefront of the struggle against SARS in Nigeria and police in the United States. Colonial laws in Nigeria exist that criminalized these identities. Naturally, throughout history people revolt against oppressive conditions, but that revolt has always been met with tremendous violence from the oppressors. In the Nigerian context for example, the collective punishment ordinance of 1909 codified colonial authorities punishing entire communities for resisting. The law, police, and prisons serve as means of social control. They violently enforce colonial power.

FSARS is the Federal Special Anti Robbery Unit; and it is notorious for murdering, kidnapping, and generally brutalizing the people. FSARS reinforces the authority of the state and colonial interests. The first police forces in Nigeria were the Royal Niger Constabulary in 1886, which enforced the will of the Royal Niger Company that was carving up Nigeria for British colonial interests. The formation of the police in Nigeria preceded that of the military, and as a result the line between the two has always been blurred. With all of this in mind, the people of Nigeria are not asking for FSARS to be reformed. There is already a long history of empty reforms being proposed and resources being pumped into the police in Nigeria.

The liberal support for the struggle in Nigeria has intentionally ignored the anti-police revolt that has characterized the struggle on the ground. The people are demanding that SARS be ended and the societal conditions that allow it to exist be ended. The people struggling on the ground quickly linked their demands to end SARS with other societal issues like poverty, homophobia, and gender-based violence. There is an understanding that oppressive conditions are created by the state which is upheld by the police and the military. During revolts, people are well aware of how police, paramilitary, and military power manifests in the streets. They know that those forces are deployed to suppress the people and protect strategic sites for the state. Most notably, during what has come to be known as the Lekki Massacre, armed forces have opened fire on protesters, killing several of them. The people have responded by targeting key sites of government authority. The action meant to snuff out rebellion has instead further fueled its flames. Police stations were burned. Prisons were burned and prisoners were able to escape. Banks were burned. Government buildings were burned. All of these acts illustrate the swiftness with which the masses will take revolutionary action to destroy their oppressors.

US imperialism is alive and well on the African Continent. The United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) was established October 1st, 2007, and dramatically expanded during the Obama administration. AFRICOM often trains the armed forces of partner states like Nigeria and supplies them to fight “terrorism.” AFRICOM also maintains military bases in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. The United States has sought to expand its economic and military influence over Nigeria through AFRICOM, propping up the very systems that oppress the people now organizing to end SARS. The same police forces and paramilitary forces that target Black people in the US are supporting the oppression of Black people on the African continent.

The UK has a long history of colonialism and neo-colonialism in Nigeria, as the Western power that colonized it. These colonial ties did not simply vanish when Nigeria gained its independence; rather those ties were transformed. The UK originally denied supporting SARS, but when it felt pressure from the Nigerian diaspora, the UK government revealed that it had been funding AND training SARS in Nigeria.

A combination of political and economic forces drive Western colonial interests in Nigeria. Nigeria is an oil-rich country (specifically the Delta area), and numerous Western companies like Shell exploit the workers there. On top of that, US security companies often “guard” the oil fields in the region, as well as building the security structures of the state. Capital is always prioritized over Black people, regardless of where they are in the world.

United States

The burning of the Third police precinct in Minneapolis was a sign to all of us that Black revolt on a mass level has finally returned to the imperial core. Despite flash-points such as LA in 1992, Ferguson in 2014 and Baltimore in 2015, the United States had been relatively quiet in regards to nationwide mass revolt as compared to the rest of the world. However, the George Floyd rebellion has finally set it off throughout the Black colony. It is critical to understand that the nation-wide George Floyd rebellion cannot be understood without grasping how the actions of the Black masses in our current moment cannot be separated from the Black revolts of the past.

The long histories of Black revolt against the racial capitalist order in the United States are proof of how the masses are the drivers of history. There is a long history of Black rebellion stretching from the Maroons and the slave uprisings, to the Long Hot Summer of 1968. The slaveocracy of the South was not destroyed by Lincoln and white abolitionists, but rather it was destroyed through the spontaneous revolt of the Black masses. Black people understood the Civil War as a moment to seize freedom, regardless of the machinations of the Union or the Confederacy, as W.E.B. Du Bois describes in *Black Reconstruction*.

The police and prison system cannot be separated from this system of chattel slavery. We must understand the revolt over the summer of 2020 was fundamentally a revolt against racial capitalism. The Black masses intentionally targeted police infrastructure across the country as well as engaging in acts of expropriation through on-foot looting and the innovative use of cars. It is clear that the Black masses are not waiting for a #DefundThePolice bill to pass, but instead they have taken action to push the pigs from Black communities, with the burning of precincts and parole offices. This attitude contrasts sharply with the reaction of the Black domestic neo-colonial elite.

In the book, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, Robert L. Allen describes the emergence of Black neo-colonial elite within the United States after the victories of Black middle class integrationists during Civil Rights. He characterized this dynamic as “domestic neo-colonialism.” Allen describes how the Black elite (made up of Black professionals, academics, technicians, executives and nonprofit employees) told the white power structure in the late 1960s/early 70s: “Give us a piece of the action, and we will run the Black communities and keep them quiet for you.” (Allen 19) This elite supplanted the old Black elite (the preachers, teachers and business owners). Over the past 50 years, this elite has only grown in power with its entrenchment in the realms of mass media, corporate America, and mainstream electoral politics. The Black neo-colonial elite (epitomized by national figures such as Kamala Harris, Joy Ann Reid, Barack Obama, and Stacey Abrams) is fundamentally not aligned with the Black masses, who revolted over the past summer.

Similar to the African leaders of newly independent nations, their class is a product of the Western education system, and thus have a role in maintaining it. This class has only deepened its power in our current moment. We must understand the Black neo-colonial elite has played a counter-insurgent role in the midst of the rebellions. These politicians successfully co-opted the energy of the rebellion (or the peaceful protest movement, as they tried to portray it) into electoral politics, thus securing a Democratic reclamation of the House, Senate and Presidency. Furthermore, the Biden presidency is being described by talking heads as the “most diverse” ever; this is the reward for the Black neo-colonial elite, who dutifully stopped the fires of the Black rebellion.

Black liberation will not be won by neo-colonial politicians. The Black masses who burned police precincts, looted and destroyed police cars across the United States, are the people who will make revolution. As conditions in the United States continue to deteriorate, some of the Black elites who previously supported Biden and Harris may attempt to set themselves up as “leaders” of the revolutionary movement. They must be opposed. We believe the Black masses in the United States will soon face a crisis similar to the first Civil War. It is therefore imperative that the revolutionary society and tactics that may result from that crisis be created by and for the Black masses from the bottom-up.

Conclusion

Pan-African revolt is rooted in the Black Radical Tradition. The Black Radical Tradition itself is rooted in a total rejection of the Western political tradition. The importance of the Black Radical Tradition is less about creating a checklist to evaluate radicalism, and more about grappling with what it means to center the political agency of Black mass movements.

As Robin Kelley notes in *Black Marxism*'s 3rd edition foreword, “[a]fricans chose flight and marronage because they were not interested in transforming Western society but in finding a way ‘home,’ even if it meant death.” There are attempts to utilize the aesthetics of Black radicalism for legitimacy by the neo-colonial elite (movies about our martyrs, quoting their speeches out of context etc...). We must not be fooled by this, because the neo-colonial elite see their work as redeeming or maintaining the state and the systems that structure it. The work of the neo-colonial elite can only ever manifest in efforts to contain the revolutionary energy that comes from the movements of the Black masses. Paying attention to the masses wherever the African diaspora exists is how we honor the Black Radical Tradition and move towards liberation.

Liberation requires real solidarity. There is an intentional misrepresentation of the best ways for people of African descent to be in solidarity with each other in order to keep us within the bounds of the Western political tradition and divorced from the Black Radical Tradition. The calls for sanctions coming from the West are misguided at best and vehicles for neo-colonialism at worst. The struggles in Nigeria and Haiti are being led by the masses, not Western states. Sanctions punish a country’s most vulnerable people. In both countries, the Black working class is exploited and finds resistance through expropriating food and commodities. Because of colonization, the struggles of the Black working class are connected. If we make gains in the imperial core, that puts our siblings on the Continent in a better position to secure their liberation.

The mission of the Black revolutionaries in the United States should be to study and learn these revolts across the African diaspora and to link these rebellions together. We build revolutionary organization in order to deepen our relationship to the struggle, to prepare and care for one another, as the next wave of Pan-African revolt comes.

Recommended Reading List

A History of Pan-African Revolt by CLR James

Black Jacobins by CLR James

Black Awakening in Capitalist America by Robert L Allen

Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism by Kwame Nkrumah

How Europe Underdeveloped Africa by Walter Rodney
The Groundings with My Brothers by Walter Rodney
Reparations as A Verb by Salish Sea Black Autonomists
Pan-Africanism Critical Kickback by Afrofuturist Abolitionists of the Americas
The Womb of the Western Theory: Trauma, Time Theft, and the Captive Maternal by Joy James
Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals by Joy James
Why Black Marxism, Why Now? by Robin Kelley
Black Marxism by Cedric Robinson
Terms of Order by Cedric Robinson

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