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The Black Lives Matter Schism

Towards a Vision for Black Autonomy

Joel Northam

September 25, 2015

The Black Lives Matter movement exhibited a schism since the first few days following the first Ferguson rebellion. I remember watching live streams of the rebellion early on as Ferguson's youth waged small scale urban combat armed with little more than rubble and glass bottles. The heroic resistance to state power, against all odds of victory in forcing a retreat of the occupying militarized police, and in the face of material consequences in the form of a brutal crackdown, was a demonstration of courage that we all should aspire to.

The repression by the armed apparatus of the state in Ferguson (and Baltimore months later) provoked another popular response. But this response took on a different character. It seemed to want to place distance between itself and those who were engaged in combat with the police. Cloaked in a veneer of inclusiveness, it drowned out the original spirit of resistance that the rebelling youths exhibited nights before. The message was "we don't want to be associated with them and we will 're-

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sist' within the confines of rules and regulations given to us by established power".

The latter trend did what it set out to do. It attracted a vast segment of the liberal left, respectable quasi-radicals, nonprofit organizations and sympathetic politicians. There were denunciations of riots, looting, and property destruction as these tactics were considered "infantile" and "alienating" to potential supporters and allies. Think piece after think piece was written about the merits and demerits of various tactics of resisting police occupation. The ones who fought back against the police in Ferguson and Baltimore were touted as "misguided" and "lacking in overall strategy" and they were ultimately left with virtually no material support to continue their organic, grass roots, militant struggle.

This schism between militant resistance and respectability has since become more acute. The mass movement has become amorphous, and what should have been channeled into organic revolutionary energy has dissipated under the weight of having an incoherent structure and lack of a declarative revolutionary political program that includes building international, intercommunal alliances with other Black left movements and anti-imperialist organizations worldwide. This flaw was seized upon by petit bourgeois elements, who have seen fit to reduce the Black Lives Matter movement to a "New Civil Rights Movement", hell bent on simply effecting policy changes rather than assigning it the character of a revolutionary liberation struggle that requires a coherent strategy and a diversity of tactics for its success.

This notwithstanding, there have been enormous organizational strides made by my local chapters of Black Lives Matter that have challenged the status quo at an operational level. It shouldn't be overlooked that the overall indictment of institutional racism that the movement has reintroduced into mainstream discourse has indeed had an effect on the consciousness of various strata of the population. The question at hand

ment. It rejects the hetero-patriarchal ethos that women should be relegated to servant status. It rejects the demonization of Black queer and trans people and instead uplifts them as leaders. We hold that one immediately relinquishes the role of "vanguard" if one subscribes to Eurocentric authoritarian hetero-patriarchal standards of gender and their corresponding roles as the norm.

The movement for Black autonomy does not include coexistence with white supremacist authority in its platform. We understand that the development of a scientific, intersectional revolutionary political theory that is applicable to our specific material conditions in the US, and our development of a praxis that tangibly counters the power of white supremacist institutions that control our lives, is the difference between being victims of genocide or soldiers at war. We understand that the striving for autonomy means provoking violent reactionary resistance to our advances. We accept this. We understand that Black liberation means human liberation, so we act in solidarity with the oppressed. Long live the Black resistance. We have nothing to lose but our chains!

we ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after like the reformists tacitly imply by their attempts at negotiating with US elites. The rest of the colonized and neo-colonized world is ready to shake off their yoke of oppression the moment it becomes clear that we've made our move. Evidence is seen in the way that African Jews in Israel were inspired by videos of Baltimore's youth overrunning riot squads. The comrades shutting down traffic arteries and battling police in Tel Aviv were hardly inspired by paid activists with forty thousand dollar a year salaries and 401Ks, but by those who heroically abandoned all respectability and asserted their identity as a threat to the establishment.

US fascism would not have established itself so securely, with every safeguard in place and every mechanism utilized at its disposal to stifle the growth of revolutionary consciousness of Black people in the US were we not innately and at our deepest core threatening to the white power structure. Acknowledgement of this orientation puts US fascism on the defensive. A movement of angry Black people should be threatening. It should heighten contradictions, it should make those invested in the status quo uneasy, and it should provoke raging emotions in ourselves as well as our class enemies.

The movement for Black Autonomy, although nascent, is the inevitable outgrowth of a decaying strategy of reformist appeals to power. We know Black lives matter. The question is whether or not we have the capacity to check any attempts at devaluation by counterrevolutionary elements from the outside and from within. The autonomous movement is building this capacity, synthesizing elements of anarchism and revolutionary socialism. Modern examples of this type of political self-determination include the Kurdish PYD/PKK in Syria and Turkey and the Zapatistas and Autodefensas in Mexico.

The autonomous movement explicitly rejects of the kind of separatist reactionary nationalism which is unfortunately endemic to many formations within the Black Liberation move-

is whether or not this indictment can be carried through to its ultimate conclusion: that those invested in maintaining our systemic oppression are not fit to rule and should be removed from power. The longer Black Lives Matter waits to answer this question, the more vulnerable it is to co-optation, derailment and ultimately, dissolution.

Naturally, within a power structure that is programmed to halt all revolutionary advances and counter all threats to its existence, the reformist trend within the Black Lives Matter schism obviously picked up the most steam; grant offers from foundations, visits to see liberal capitalist politicians and air-time on CNN and MSNBC ensured that. Now we have the ultimate bastardization of militant resistance manifested in the form of Campaign Zero, a series of policy proposals that seek to end police violence in America, as if it's possible that an institution founded in order to capture and torture runaway slaves and to protect slave masters' property can be reformed.

Campaign Zero was proposed by so called leaders of the movement and twitter celebrities alike, with virtually no consultation with the mass base of people who put themselves on the line in the streets against the armed apparatus of the state. It is an arbitrary and piecemeal attempt to synthesize militant resistance with the "progressivism" of the Democratic Party, which ultimately leaves white supremacist institutions intact. This overt display of conciliatory politics is nothing short of a betrayal by Black petit-bourgeois liberals who legitimately hate the system, but couldn't garner the fortitude to imagine what they would do without it. It is opportunist defeatism in writing.

Anyone who has a halfway decent grasp of history knows that the wanton destruction of social movements spurred on by establishment liberals is not a new phenomenon. At this point it's formulaic. The Democratic party exists to adapt to the ebbs and flows of social changes in this country in a manner that provides concessions while maintaining the current

political economy of white supremacist, capitalist society. This is the Democratic party's only real demarcation from the outward and openly bigoted reactionary Republican party. Both preserve the system. It is not far off to suggest that the rapid resurgence of white nationalist fascism that is currently being nurtured by the political right wing is a safeguard should the liberal wing of the political establishment fail to disrupt the movement and quell Black radicalism entirely.

With Campaign Zero and the corresponding frantic search for support within the current bourgeois political milieu, the reformists within Black Lives Matter are holding their breath for the 2016 elections, where the US ruling class will ultimately decide whether the reactionary or "humanitarian" wings of ruling power will respond to the political unrest in a way that guarantees their continued existence. While this anticipation may signal a decline in movement activity, it should be primer to those activists (who don't have to be reminded that the white supremacist capitalist power structure will remain in place no matter who wins the presidency) to begin to nurture the elements within the movement that are not seeking to coexist with the system.

"Black Lives Matter" should not be declared as an appeal to ruling power or racist white America to accept us as human. They don't and they won't. Our value in this country has always been directly proportional to the amount of profit we produce. With the advent of financial mechanisms that no longer rely on Black labor to produce wealth, we have now become disposable. The increase of extrajudicial murders by the state and relative impunity that racist vigilante murderers of our people seem to have are indicators of this. We say "Black Lives Matter" as a reminder to us as Black people that our lives matter regardless if we're accepted as human by white society or not, and is said as a declaration of resistance to our condition as beasts of burden for capital.

But a declaration is not enough. Neither are policy reforms, symbolic political actions and awareness campaigns. What is needed right now is an entire shift in orientation. A complete overhaul of all of the resources we have and can acquire at our disposal dedicated to the purpose of relinquishing our dependency on the economic system that exploits us; the building, maintenance, and defense of our own institutions and organs of power, channeled for the general uplift of our people, for our people, and by our people. The institutions that the state uses to oppress us must have their diametrical counterpart built by us for liberation purposes and must function to fill the void that has been left by the excesses and crises of transnational capitalism. Responsibility for the defense of our institutions rests with us, and this defense will also serve the purpose of resisting any and all attempts to put us back on the capitalist plantation.

We must strive for nothing less than the goal of complete self-determination and autonomy of African descended people in the US and abroad, working hand in hand in communal fellowship with other oppressed peoples who have their own contradictions with the power structure. Only by aligning ourselves with the international anticolonial, anti-imperial movement can success be achieved, as we represent only a little less than 13% of the national population.

Our organs of power will create a situation in which dual power will give rise to all manner of reactionary fascism and their corresponding weapons, as we are under siege on two sides: one side by the state that wants to continue our exploitation or annihilate us, and on the other side by the nation's white nationalist and white supremacist silent majority which simply just wants to annihilate us. Organization, preparation, and development of the means to combat these threats is paramount and should be considered an immediate priority.

This is our reality. We do not live in a reality whereby those who are materially invested in our subjugation will suddenly come to their senses, take pity on us, pay us reparations while