Why You Shouldn't Romanticize the Black Panther Party

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This year marks the 50ᵗʰ anniversary of the founding of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP). It is arguably the most revolutionary and impactful organization created by the African-American liberation struggle. There is much that may be learned from the legacy of the BPP in advancing today's struggle for freedom, justice and a world that is free of capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism and racism.

The BPP's explicit commitment to revolutionary socialism was a notable development, which serves as a contrast to the failure of many current activists and social justice organizations to openly embrace socialism. Well, we are not referencing Bernie Sanders' "socialism" that is really capitalism with a human face. In Eldridge Cleaver's On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party (Part I), he states that the BPP was committed to Marxism-Leninism or state socialism, while altering it to the Afrikan-American social reality. It should be expected that the ideas of socialism will be adapted to the concrete conditions in specific societies.

It is not enough for the radical forces to assert that they are anti-capitalist. That is a politically negative and vague position. Radicals must name the political ideology to which they are committed. If progressive individuals and organizations appreciate the BPP's radicalism, they need to seriously explore socialism as the antidote to capitalism.

However, given humanity's experience with authoritarian or state socialism in the former Soviet Union, the radicals of today would need to move away from the socialism of the BPP that promotes an all-power state and top-down leadership. The anarchist Mikhail Bakunin is on-point here: "Liberty without socialism is privilege and injustice. Socialism without liberty is slavery and brutality." Revolutionary socialism must commit itself to ending all hierarchical relations in society. The creation of the classless, stateless and self-organized (communist) society is impossible through the path of state socialism.

The BPP's survival programmes served as an excellent way for the group to implant itself among the people as well as to organize with them. The BPP provided and/or initiated a comprehensive and impressive range of programmes. Huey P. Newton explains the context for these programmes:

> We recognized that in order to bring the people to the level of consciousness where they would seize the time, it would be necessary to serve their interests in survival by developing programs which would help them to meet their daily needs. For a long time we have had such programs not only for survival but for organizational purposes.

There are two things that might become obvious to the reader after going through the book

[The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Program](#). Firstly, the programmes were not sustainable. They depended on donations from individuals, businesses and religious organizations or foundation funding to survive and they generated no revenue. If a radical group gets locked into this operational mode, it might degenerate into a social service, reformist political entity. Since revolutionary organizations will not be funded by the state and foundations, they must find other ways to self-finance the struggle for liberation.

Secondly, the BPP's survival programmes provide a compelling case for self-organizing the people to autonomously operate their projects, programmes or institutions. The people should not just serve as volunteers, advisors or clients. A central role of the organizers is to equip the people with the knowledge, skills and attitude to collectively address their needs. This approach would affirm in practice the slogan "All Power to the People" as well as operationalize participatory democracy within the ranks of the labouring classes.

Furthermore, in the event that the revolutionary organizers and organizations are rendered ineffective by the secret police, regular cops, the court and prison system, as happened to the BPP, the people would be able to continue running their programmes and institutions. The state would have to repress the people, as a whole, in order to stop them from living the resistance through their projects, programmes and institutions.

In this "Age of Vulgar Identity Politics" wherein each oppressed group retreats into the protective cocoon of its particular identity, the BPP's practice of solidarity could instruct us on the strategic value of principled alliances among different people in society. Uniting the oppressed against the forces of oppression should be seen as a positive and essential action. In the paper [Black Panther Party: 1966-1982](#), Michael Carpini states that "the Black Panther [P]arty connected the self-determinacy of blacks to the self-determinacy of other marginalized groups such as the poor, women, and homosexuals." The preceding approach of the BPP offers a way forward in uniting the people who experience exploitation.

Some Black nationalists viewed the BPP's alliance with largely White organizations such as the Patriot Party, White Panther Party and Peace and Freedom Party with suspicion. Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael) claimed that the BPP would play the role of cannon fodder for the White left. Ture's position reflects a lack of confidence in the capacity of Afrikan revolutionaries to enter into alliances with White organizations on an equitable and non-exploitative basis. One would not argue that there will not be difficulties in the coalitions or alliances between revolutionary Afrikan and White organizations. But they must create principles of unity that will guide their actions and processes to deal with the unavoidable problems that will emerge when people work together.

A problematic element of the BPP's programme was the central role that it gave to the lumpenproletariat as agents of revolutionary transformation. Eldridge Cleaver channelled the BPP's position on the lumpen when [he asserted that](#) "the Lumpenproletariat is the Left Wing" of the working-class in the Afrikan-American nation and the "Mother Country" (the United States). It argued that the working-class had embraced the values and aspirations of capitalism and had carved "out a comfortable niche for itself." As a result of this development, the unionized working-class is now a part of a "most un-revolutionary, reformist minded movement that is only interested in higher wages and more job security." The lumpen cannot be the left-wing of the working-class because it has no direct relationship with the world of work.

According to the BPP, the isolation of the lumpen from the means of production and the dominant institutions leaves it with "no choice but to manifest its rebellion in the University of the Streets." Cleaver and the BPP viewed the urban rebellion as the defining feature of the struggle for emancipation in the United States. This line of thought led Cleaver to declare that "One outstanding characteristic of the liberation struggle of Black people in the United States has been that most of the activity has taken place in the streets." Since the urban uprisings are episodic and short-lived, the bulk of the organizing work among the Afrikan-American working-class takes place in the spaces in which it lives, works and plays. It is not the members of the lumpenproletariat who carry out the consistent, systematic and ongoing organizing that is the basis of effecting Afrikan liberation. It is the working-class and its radical or revolutionary petite bourgeois allies who shoulder the task of organizing and mobilizing the people.

Cleaver rebuked some Marxist-Leninists when he wrote that "It can be said that the true revolutionaries [the lumpen] in the urban centers of the world have been analyzed out of the revolution." There is no question about the fact that the ruling-class sees urban insurrections as frightening affairs and that the street becomes the theatre of the oppressed during those infrequent moments of resistance. But Cleaver's claim that "by and large, the rebellions have been spearheaded by Black Lumpen," ignored the fact that many of the young people who actively participated in these uprisings were members of the working-class.

According to the March 1968 issued document the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders that reported on the causes behind the 1967 rebellions:

> The typical rioter was a teenager or young adult, a lifelong resident of the city in which he rioted, a high school dropout; he was, nevertheless, somewhat better educated than his nonrioting Negro neighbor, and was usually underemployed or employed in a menial job. He was proud of his race, extremely hostile to both whites and middle-class Negroes and, although informed about politics, highly distrustful of the political system.

The typical participant in the rebellions were members of the Afrikan-American working-class and that may be deduced from the fact that he was "underemployed or employed." It is reasonable to assume that the lumpenproletariat do participate in urban uprisings but given its social characteristics, this class might simply use this festival of resistance in the streets for its own immediate material gains.

The composition of Marx's lumpenproletariat, as outlined in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon, was definitely not a positive or endearing description:

> Alongside decayed roués with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni,1 pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, maquereaux [pimps], brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars — in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French call la bohème.

The Marxist Internet Archive lists the [21st century members of the lumpenproletariat](#) as "beggars, prostitutes, gangsters, racketeers, swindlers, petty criminals, tramps, chronic unemployed or unemployables... and all sorts of declassed, degraded or degenerated elements."

In the autobiography [A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story](#), Elaine Brown, former BPP Chairperson, incorrectly includes members of the working-class ("black domestics and porters, nurses' aides and maintenance men, laundresses and cooks, sharecroppers, unpropertied ghetto dwellers") in the lumpen category. Brown demonstrates a lack of ideological clarity on the question of the people who constitute the working-class. But she did capture key members of the Afrikan-American lumpen: "gang members and the gangsters, the pimps and the prostitutes, the drug users and dealers, [and] the common thieves and murderers."

How realistic is the expectation that the criminalized lumpen elements, Huey P. Newton's "illegitimate capitalists," will serve as agents of liberation? If members of the lumpen are transformed into agents of the revolution by way of methodical political education and disciplined organizing within the working-class, they have essentially committed "class suicide" and, as such, would no longer be lumpen.

The BPP was ill-advised in believing that the lumpen, especially the criminal elements, could serve as a revolutionary force. The lumpen panders to predatory behaviour, self-destructive lifestyle of the street and "militarism." The lumpen can become a useful part of the revolutionary force, but only after extensive political and ideological education. There is not even a single case, since the emergence of capitalism, of the lumpen serving as the revolutionary force in struggles for liberation. Samuel Farber's essay [The Black Panthers Reconsidered](#) is a good source on the challenges of the lumpen as political actors or activists.

Radical organizations and organizers should be wary of the BPP's top-down leadership approach. Kwame Ture highlights this problem in his autobiography [Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)](#):

> From a SNCC perspective, the organization seemed to me entirely too hierarchical. With a quasi-military chain of command even. Not enough serious political education instead of slogans. Also, there apparently was no time, and absolutely no provision, for full internal discussion within the organization. Instead, "mandates," "orders," and "directives" were handed down whether or not folks agreed with or even understood them.

In this climate, to raise questions, even legitimate and sincere ones, was too often seen as disloyalty or as challenging authority, an error to be corrected with physical or ideological intimidation, expulsion, or both... C'mon, "beat downs" may be a common gang tactic, but they are no way to build loyalty, unity, or even discipline in a radical black political movement.

The BPP's revolutionary legacy offers us many useful lessons in our organizing work to create the just and emancipated world. We should fully explore and draw insights from the BPP's legacy in other areas such as gender relations in movement organizations, practising principled anti-imperialism, role of armed resistance in the global North and the centrality of

systematic political education in preparing organizers. Romanticizing the contribution of the Black Panther Party would make adoring fans of us, and not clear-eyed, unsentimental revolutionaries.

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