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Cover photo: burning buildings in Newark, July 14 1967.

An unfortunate consequence of the right wing's spectacle on January 6th is that masses of people, including radicals, will associate insurrection only with the far right. While no revolutionary can possibly believe that what took place was an insurrection, the media and the Democratic Party have made the case that it was exactly that. At this moment, so-called American citizens are called forth to defend our so-called democracy against so-called fascism. But insurrection does not exclusively belong to the right. While the Black Radical Tradition in the academy and in activist circles has separated itself from its revolutionary predecessors, the flame of insurrection cannot be extinguished for those who know where to look: the George Floyd Rebellion of 2020. And yet, while the Rebellion harbored insurrectionary potential, it failed to produce even one insurrectionary moment. If we are going to defeat racial capitalism and the racial state, we must attempt to recover insurrection and understand why the insurrectionary potential of the George Floyd Rebellion stopped short. That is, we must ask, why, in spite of all the riots, the Rebellion never made the leap to become a revolution?

Answering this question in part requires accounting for the inheritance of the Black Radical Tradition that emerged after Reconstruction, since its contradictions and shortcomings are still with us today. The fact is that it has not generated a serious attempt at insurrection and this has left us with the lack of an insurrectionary tradition—particularly an insurrectionary Black Radical Tradition—that could serve as a touchstone for overcoming the limits of the riots we saw this summer.

For instance, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale’s armed march into California’s state capitol building was not a serious attack on the capitalist state, but a spectacle that didn’t have to pose serious questions about the art of insurrection. This is partly responsible for what the revolutionary left is today: a wing of capitalism that is all too comfortable in legal protests. Similarly, today’s left interprets the Panthers as social democratic service providers, not as revolutionaries who were trying to overthrow racial capitalism. And, of course, as the wave of radical struggles receded, the Panthers succumbed to reformism as well.

Fast forward over half a century and today we see countless activists continue with noble efforts of mutual aid, meaningless marches, and support for AOC and Bernie, despite the fact, and seemingly as if unaware, that the proletariat had just unleashed the greatest upheaval of our generation. However, lacking an insurrectionary tradition to draw from, even the rebels of 2020 did everything short of the one thing that could actually destroy the anti-Black order of racial capitalism. What is remarkable about the George Floyd riots is that there was no attempt to smash a local city government, although we caught glimpses of what attacks on the racial state might look like: the burning of the 3rd precinct, attacks on courthouses, and assaults on Department of Homeland Security facilities. For all the talk of those activists who maintain that the entire U.S. system is anti-Black, we did not see an attempt to completely destroy it. And what does it tell us about where we are today, that the proletariat did not attempt this either? The absence of a concrete image of communism on our horizon is linked to the lack of an insurrectionary tradition in the U.S. and, together, is why we are still trapped in a society that is killing us all—Black people most of all.

What we experienced this summer was not an insurrection and certainly not a revolution, but a series of revolts. Revolts, insurrections, and revolutions are three different, albeit related, processes. Whether this summer's riots form a part of an insurrectionary or revolutionary process will depend on what happens in the ongoing capitalist crisis, what the proletariat does to advance class struggle, how the government responds, how we combat the right wing, and how the far left navigates all these dynamics. For revolutionaries, the goal of every strategic and tactical decision is to steer these dynamics toward an insurrection and, ultimately, toward revolution. Understanding this difference is crucial in making sense of where the most militant layers of the proletariat are at, what our tasks are, and where we are on the path toward revolution.

THE LEGACY OF THE 1960S

The frequency of riots in the 1960s forced radicals and revolutionaries to ask a number of questions. Why were they happening? Who was rioting? Should radicals defend them? What did they signify? How did the riots connect to Black liberation? What was their relationship to global struggles? How should they inform revolutionary practice and organization?

The tradition of Black liberation answered these questions along four different—though not necessarily opposed—lines. There is the sociological analysis of the riot, the political analysis, the comparative analysis, and the revolutionary analysis. Today the dominant sociological, political, and comparative approaches are divorced from revolutionary analysis and, ultimately, from the Black Radical Tradition. This puts them in the service of reformism instead of liberation.

The sociological analysis describes the social conditions that create riots. James Baldwin says,

What causes the eruptions, the riots, the revolts—whatever you want to call them—is the despair of being in a static position...of watching your father, your brother, your uncle, your cousin...who has no future. And when the summer comes, both fathers and sons

are in the streets—they can't stay in the houses. I was born in those houses and I know. And it's not their fault.

While sociological analyses like Baldwin's home in on the oppressive conditions that give rise to resistance, as I will explain shortly, it points in two contradictory directions: liberal policies and revolutionary warfare.

Dr. King developed the second, political kind of analysis when he said, "But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard... [America] has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met." The language of the unheard captures the truth that most Black proletarians have no institutional mediation with the capitalist state other than the police. Yet King's account leads directly to a reformist politics of inclusion: the unheard are seen as unorganized, frustrated, and angry because they are unable to participate in the so-called American democratic process. What they need is a spokesperson, someone who shares their grievances and has learned to speak to the white state in a language that it can understand.

A third strategy is to defend Black proletarian riots by comparing them with the struggles of white people, so as to expose the double standard of white supremacy. For example, Baldwin pointed out following the riots after the assassination of Dr. King, "We call them riots because they were black people. We wouldn't call them riots if they were white people." More recently, liberals have been busy talking about how the police response would have been far more severe if those who stormed the capitol on January 6th were Black. This is true, but a comparative defense of Black rioters implies that whiteness is the measure and the horizon of Black people and their struggles (i.e., we should treat Black struggles as we do white struggles). This is hardly a revolutionary grasp of the riot and race, which must destroy any comparison between whitey and non-white peoples.

Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, and Muhammad Ahmad started a new approach to the riot in Black liberation. They moved the discussion of the riot from a critique of social-political exclusion and white hypocrisy to one of strategy, organization, and revolution. In the 1960s,

urban guerilla warfare came to replace the traditional strategies of proletarian class struggle. The involvement of Black troops in the Vietnam war meant that a generation of young men were taught how to fight, kill, and think like soldiers. There were also examples of successful rural and urban guerrilla struggles, most importantly in Vietnam, Cuba, and Algeria (yet this strategy was a failure in core capitalist countries).

In 1966, one year after the Watts uprising, Muhammad Ahmad published his explosive text, *World Black Revolution*. Ahmad was a leader of the underground group, Revolutionary Action Movement, and travelled the country to push the movement further to the left. This text combined third-worldist Marxism, urban guerilla warfare, insurrectionism, and Black nationalism to create a politics that would shape the rest of the 1960s and 70s.

World Black Revolution situates the tactics and strategies of armed guerilla struggle in the context of the anti-police riots emerging in the U.S. when Ahmad was writing:

Each year rioting, as a result of police brutality and oppression, becomes more extensive and ferocious...During times of massive rioting, too many of our people are forced to fight armed cops and troops with bare hands and stones. Cops and troops must be disarmed and their weapons turned against other cops to obtain weapons of defense. Tanks and armoured cars must be knocked out with molotov cocktails and captured when possible...During the hours of day sporadic rioting takes place and massive sniping. Night brings all-out warfare, organized fighting and unlimited terror against the oppressor and his forces.... Urban guerilla warfare is an ever-growing concept as a solution to the end of oppression among the Black masses in America.

Ahmad viewed the riot as an opportunity for revolutionaries to go on the offensive in a strategy of urban guerilla warfare and thus called for the organization of the Black Liberation Front and the Black Liberation Army. He recognized the leap needed for the riot to begin driving the type of organizations that could deepen and further the struggle.

For him, organization is not opposed to the riot *per se*, as is often assumed, but can in fact develop out of the riot. Furthermore, Ahmad does not see the riot here as symptomatic of a lack of proletarian consciousness, but as an organic form of Black struggle that is necessary for overthrowing racialism and imperialism. It is the form of struggle in which revolutionaries must situate themselves and move.

At the same time, Ahmad recognized that riots are insufficient. Strikes are needed: “A Black General Strike... would have to be called in order to throw chaos into the oppressor’s economy and disturb his social system.” Later, he quotes Robert F. Williams at length:

When massive violence comes, the U.S.A. will become a bedlam of confusion and chaos. The factory workers will be afraid to venture out on the street to report to their jobs. The telephone workers and radio workers will be afraid to report. All transportation will come to a complete standstill. Stores will be destroyed and looted. Property will be damaged and expensive buildings will be reduced to ashes. Essential pipelines will be severed and blown up and all manner of sabotage will occur. Violence and terror will spread like a firestorm.

Ahmad does not explain how the Black General Strike will happen and there is a clear over-reliance on destroying sites of production, which raises the question of what kind of world the Black Revolution will inherit. He leaves us with the image of a landscape of smouldering infrastructure.

This problem of the relation between the riot, the strike, and revolution went unaddressed by the most important revolutionary organization of the era, the Black Panther Party. Eldridge Cleaver’s “On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party” (1969) specifically roots the Panthers in what he calls the left wing of the proletariat, namely the lumpen (the classical working class made up the right). Since the lumpen-proletariat has a minimal relationship to waged labor at best, their rebellions do not manifest around the means of production, but in the urban space of the street, neighborhood, and city. Thus he writes,

the Lumpen has no opportunity to do any collective bargaining... It has no immediate oppressor except perhaps the Pig Police with which it is confronted daily. So that the very conditions of life of the Lumpen dictates the so-called spontaneous reactions against the system, and because the Lumpen is in this extremely oppressed condition, it is therefore an extreme reaction against the system as a whole.

To deny the riot is to deny the existence of the lumpen proletariat and the form of struggle that it must conduct, because it can do nothing else. And yet here Cleaver reinforces the standard Marxist equation between the lumpen and the riot, which misses the fact that, to a large degree, the class position of the rioter also included the Black working class, as General Baker and the Kerner Commission observed. That is, Black proletarians were no longer launching their most powerful attacks against racial capitalism from the workplace.

Nevertheless, the Panthers' vanguardism arose in part as a rejection of the spontaneity of riots. Huey P. Newton's 1967 "Correct Handling of a Revolution" is a classic vanguardist statement on riots that proceeds from *World Black Revolution*. Huey argued that "The Black masses are handling the resistance incorrectly" and point to how East Oakland rioters "were herded into a small area by the Gestapo police and immediately contained by the brutal violence of the oppressor's storm troops."

The Panther's vanguard line that they must first organize Black neighborhoods before they are ready to rise up can be seen in David Hilliard's telling of the aftermath of Dr. King's assassination in April, 1968:

In the next twenty-four hours, Black communities throughout the country take to the streets. We're organizing for a major fund-raising barbecue to take place this weekend in De Fremery Park, and every time we return to the office from distributing leaflets the television newscasters report a new addition to the list of riot-torn cities. We don't want Oakland to be included. Three months of analyzing

Fanon on spontaneity has convinced us of the limitations of unorganized rebellions like Watts...Stay cool, we tell people. The Party must lead the masses, Huey tells us in a tape, and explains to them that riots are not revolutionary anymore. We've got to organize the community. (Hilliard 183)

Hilliard's reflections are striking in that, while the proletariat was fighting in the street, the Panthers were removed from it, doing what is known today as "base-building." Just as the strike has been historically counterposed to the riot, so too has "organizing." Yet the reality was that the proletariat was ahead of the Panthers and its riots produced revolutionaries who would then go on to join the group.

ASSESSING 1960S BLACK RADICALS ON THE RIOT

Looking back, most Black revolutionaries of the 1960s and 70s era failed to see that they were not living in a revolutionary time. And when they realized they were not living in such times, such as Huey, the alternative strategies of survival pending revolution or running for office in Oakland also failed to overthrow racial capitalism. Ultimately, revolutionaries on their own do not make revolutions. They are primarily products of immense crisis, proletarian class struggle, and ruling class blunders. Since revolution cannot be willed at random, the question revolutionaries must ask is, how do we know when revolution is possible? To use the weapon of insurrection, revolutionaries must have a careful analysis of what is happening broadly and at the molecular level of the proletariat. However, the 1960s in the United States is less revolutionary than it often appears in hindsight.

While Cleaver and Ahmad were right about the need for armed confrontation with the state, they failed to see that revolution will require the mass participation of proletarians who inhabit spaces of economic power that must be taken, destroyed, or transformed. When the masses did appear in their strategies, it was in the form of soldiers and not as proletarians. Even if the Panthers or RAM had turned to the strike, they would have seen that workers were no longer fighting to

build a new world *as workers*. Racism had effectively split the workplace, and most Black labor struggles had already been set by the Civil Rights agenda. Black workers wanted better working conditions, Black union representation, and a stop to discrimination in the workplace. When many Black workers imagined liberation, it looked like having the same opportunities as white people. In addition to racial divisions inside the class, the worker-inventor and the collaboration between workers, engineers, and planners that founded the council movements of the early 20th century were absent. The split between intellectual and manual labor meant that the strike waves of the late 1960s and early 70s were entirely defensive, unable to mount an effective assault on capital. More than anything else, the disappearance of workplaces as a site of revolutionary class struggle was the limit that barred the riot from leaping beyond itself.

A second factor is that, crucially, the Panthers became a national group only after King's assassination, which meant that they were not involved in the two most violent uprisings of the late 1960s, namely, Newark and Detroit. The peaks of 1967 and 1968 had already passed when the Black Liberation Army began their armed actions; such rebellions would not return until the 1980s. Other U.S. guerilla groups, notably the Weather Underground (1969) and the George Jackson Brigade (1974) also formed after the peak of proletarian activity and failed to incorporate themselves into mass movements. Reflecting on the BLA, Russell Maroon Shoatz writes, "The BLA fielded the most effective Black assault units since the maroons! Their primary weakness, and the situation which caused them most harm, was their failure to properly integrate themselves with the Black masses and their inability to interact with above ground revolutionary political groups." While not discounting the important role of armed struggle, we need to situate ourselves in the mass activities of the proletariat. Today, those are riots. As Arturo and I have argued, the key is to minimize armed warfare, not out of some liberal concern for violence, but because of revolutionary approaches to ethics and strategy.

And finally, if revolution will ever be a possibility we truly need "many Vietnams," not in the sense of armed struggle, but the intensity

and duration of crisis (which may include war). With this in mind, the pandemic is only the beginning of the crisis. For many in this country to risk everything, it will take much more than arguments or the current level of societal decay. Revolutions are a mirror held up to the immensity of crisis and not just the simple result of social movements or the raising of consciousness through radical publications.

As of 2021, the concept of urban guerilla warfare is more romance than revolutionary strategy. COINTELPRO went after the 1960s and 70s Black revolutionaries while the Black proletariat faced recessions, deindustrialization, white flight, and general economic devastation. What followed was a swamp of liberalism, social democracy, and the success of the Black middle class.

RIOT PRIME: THE 60S LEGACY

Johsua Clover's 2016 book *Riot Strike Riot* has given a broader meaning to the uprisings of the 1960s by situating them within the long history of class struggle under capitalism. His history argues that such struggles predominantly took the form of riots from the 14th to the 18th centuries, which were typically waged over the price and availability of goods. From the 19th to the middle of the 20th century, it took the form of strikes over the conditions of labor and the wage relation itself. In the late 20th century, class struggle once again returned to the riot, but under new capitalist conditions that gave them a different form. Clover calls this the "riot prime," drawing on Marx's formula for surplus value. The riot prime is the organic form of class struggle in late capitalism, which in turn is characterized by the decline of U.S. hegemony, financialization, and post-Fordism. Such riots arose in the United States "as a new phase of racialized struggle emerging from and against the history of the more reform-oriented Civil Rights movement that by 1965 has largely won the victories it will win."

But Clover, like his 1960s predecessors, struggles with how riots might make the leap into revolution. It just seems to happen for Clover: "If the square and the street have been the two places of *riot prime*, they both open into the commune." Yet today's riots hit their limit

when they exhaust available goods: when rioters find the stores empty and can no longer reproduce themselves through the wage, they tend to retreat back into capitalist social relations.

The reality is that no riot in the United States has leapt into commune, which forces us to ask, is the riot a dead end? The answer can only come from what proletarians do in the coming years. One thing we can see from here, however, is that the geographical distances and borders that separate proletarians on a global scale form a real barrier to proletarian unity. The sprawling logistics of capital that separate rioters from the sites of production span such vast distances that no immediate, concrete solidarities avail themselves. The rioters will never meet the workers who produce the commodities they are looting. If riots must solve the problem of reproducing life in order to become communes, then they will first have to deal with the fact that many of the workers who reproduce life are absent from the riots in the U.S. Today we glimpse social reproduction in square occupations and autonomous zones, but these are typically divorced from the centers of economic power. Even the enormity of Tahrir Square is small in comparison to the global factory. Just as communist and decolonial revolutions forged international solidarities, today's proletarians will have to forge a new framework for attacking capital at the global level. One hopeful sign is that the U.S. riots picked up tactics from an ongoing international wave of struggle, such as being water, frontlining, and using lasers and umbrellas. Activists and proletarians are watching each other across national borders. But tactical memetics has yet to develop into the kinds of political solidarities that can coordinate riots, strikes, and blockades simultaneously in NYC, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, Karachi, Durban, and Rotterdam.

THE BLACK RADICAL TRADITION IN THE RIOT PRIME

Returning to the Black Radical Tradition, it has taken many forms: slave revolts and insurrections, mass protests and non-violence, armed struggles for national liberation, and labor strikes. Today, it takes the form of "riot prime." Each of these forms loosely correspond to dif-

ferent eras, meaning the predominance of one form does not exclude others. So while they certainly overlap, the attempt to periodize them helps to identify the most dynamic forms of struggle and, most importantly, what revolutionaries must do to organize through them. For revolutionary strategy cannot go against the proletariat; it must start from what the proletariat is doing.

Clover's concept of the "riot prime" helps make the nature of proletarian activity visible in the post-War United States. Since then, the riot prime has emerged three times: 1964-1968, 1980-1992 (most notably in Miami and Los Angeles), and 2014 to present. Contrary to claims from many on the left that the American proletariat has been docile in defeat since the 1960s (a narrative that dogmatically centers the labor movement), the proletariat has been fighting against the police and capital for over fifty years. That is, if one steps out of the factory and into the streets, one finds that while the Black Radical Tradition could no longer be found in revolutionary organizations with mass appeal, it was alive in the riots of the rising racialized surplus populations of the 1980s and onward.

Yet what the concept of the "riot prime" doesn't illuminate are the twists and turns of the global context that gave U.S. struggles their meaning and horizon. The 1964 cycle in the U.S. was part of a global wave of struggles whose horizon was national liberation and communism. By the 1980s, revolutionary nationalism and state communism were defeated or in decline and the riots from 1980 to 1992 no longer pointed to another world. As such the conditions for riots to develop into insurrections, communes, or revolutions were highly unfavorable.

Our current cycle must be placed in the context of a global wave of struggles stemming from the 2008 economic crisis. Here too the old horizons of liberation (and their pitfalls) have evaporated; and the struggles that fight austerity, corruption, and police power have yet to produce a new positive horizon. In this era where the classical workers movement of the 20th century has decidedly disappeared, it is surplus populations and college graduates without a future that continue to form major segments of movements. The failures of the 1960s revolutionaries indicate that we should look neither to guerilla warfare nor

to the working class alone; instead, we will have to create a new politics starting with proletarian struggles, or face utter defeat.

CONCLUSION

The affirmation of insurrection fundamentally separates revolutionaries from reformists. And while one of the consequences of January 6th is that insurrection will for a time be associated with the far right, revolutionaries have theorized and practiced insurrection for centuries now. Setting aside the liberal hysteria surrounding January 6th, it serves as a reminder to us to learn from our tradition—in particular the 1960s. Sometimes there is a risk of LARPing when we take insurrection seriously. But as the last few years have demonstrated, those who have been accused of LARPing can occasionally leap from the realm of fantasy and onto the stage of world history.

While insurrections in the 19th and early 20th centuries were predicated on strikes and workers' councils, today we see the riot prime as the most common form of proletarian activity, one that comes with its own set of tactical, strategic, political, and organizational problems.

More traditional communists will argue that the Black revolutionaries of the 60s needed a workplace orientation. And yet a generation of revolutionaries, including the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, attempted exactly this and failed. Today, the workers' movement is weaker than it was then, and although strikes are returning, calling for a generalized return to workplace organizing in light of the riot's limitations seems as questionable as calling for armed struggle.

While no form of struggle guarantees victory, the way we fight will inevitably shape the type of world we end up in. With this in mind, we can see the riot's immense importance in a period where all struggles have become charades, IG posts, and other spectacles of late racial capitalism. In contrast to the symbolic and empty gestures of leftist anti-racism and anti-capitalism, the riot is the material unfolding of both. The power of riots to break through the spectacle is connected to their specifically revolutionary character: their openness to the participation of any proletarian, in contrast to unions and NGOs that treat

struggle as their private property. In its openness, the riot momentarily solves the historic problems of racial division. The riot prime allows for creativity, spontaneity, courage, and joy to flow through it, in contrast to the scripted and stage-managed charade of leftist events, strikes, marches, and civil disobedience. All struggles have something to learn from this characteristic of riots.

We have a record from the 1960s that gives us many clues on what to do and what to avoid. Instead of thinking of riots in military terms that require transforming proletarians to professional soldiers, riots need to remain on the plane at which proletarian subjects and actions exist. Which forms of action invite other layers of the proletariat to participate not only in the riot, but also to flex additional forms of proletarian power such as blockades, occupations, and strikes? And within the riots themselves an entire ecology of support is needed, from people who provide medical aid, to those who feed rioters, to those who cheer them on from their porches, to name only a few. Finally, to overcome the limit of reproduction, riots will have to do more than burn down the carceral state and empty out fancy stores; the decisive question is what builds proletarian power and solidarity. Many believe that proletarian thinking only changes by reading something, but the riot is its own unique text, requiring nuance and grace, and signaling to proletarians, “this way, and not that.” The targets that rioters select, the weapons they deploy, and the slogans in their graffiti send messages not only to the enemy, but to other proletarians. In any event, proletarian insurrections will only be figured out by risky experiments, by trial and error.

Whatever the critiques, riots were understood by many Black revolutionaries in the 60s as part of a revolutionary struggle because they were situated within a global struggle of the oppressed. The George Floyd Rebellion was hardly seen in that light. If anything, it was the far right that picked up on the unique relationship of class and race in U.S. society: they saw the riots as another sign of the coming civil war. This lack of a horizon within movements is a sign of a larger global dilemma, where such movements are capable of standing against inequality, corruption, and police brutality, but struggle to create a com-

mon revolutionary language of what they are for. Movements will have to develop a vision outside of racial capitalism, the state, and empire, but that will be inseparable from class struggle as a new generation of revolutionaries emerges that can articulate a vision that speaks to the moment and the future.

One of the things the Panthers were able to do was to function as a coordinating node for those who were radicalized by the riots. Tens of thousands of mostly nameless proletarians rioted in the 1960s, but unlike the Panthers, no one remembers them as individuals. We have not seen a similar attempt at keeping the revolutionary energy alive by organizational means today. This is not the place to solve this issue, but one should take note of it, because coordination is needed, not only for purposes of militancy, strategy, and politics, but for also building community.

Finally, in order to understand the relationship of riots to insurrections, we may need to reach further back in the Black Radical Tradition to slave revolts. But here, too, this past has to be transformed from history into strategic, organizational, and political lessons applicable for the 21st century.

Coming to terms with the absence of an insurrectionary legacy in the US Black Radical Tradition in the 20th century, and what impact it's had on Black proletarian revolts of the past 50 years.