

In a society segregated by race, is it possible to build organizations in which Black and white revolutionaries work together for a common purpose? In this sweeping essay, Shemon considers this question from the standpoint of the 2020 uprisings.



RACE AND ORGANIZATION AFTER THE GEORGE FLOYD UPRISING

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INTRODUCTION

BLACK AND WHITE PEOPLE fought together in the George Floyd Uprising, but there has yet to be a recomposition of organizations, networks, or other kinds of political intimacies, which reflect the demographics of the anti-police riot. Why can Black and white people fight together in an uprising, but fail to sit in a room together, to strategize the next steps? What happens to us as we walk away from a multi-racial riot in which both Black and white militants fought the police?

This essay is not meant to be a history of the past. While it is a synthesis of texts and experiences, it is ultimately geared towards making sense of the segregation of what is arguably the last remaining current of revolutionary politics among white people in the United States—the ultra-left. White Leninists, Trotskyists, Stalinists and Maoists have made considerable contributions to the historical analysis of Black liberation, but I will not pay particular attention to them, since none of these tendencies made any relevant contributions in the George Floyd Uprising. It was the white ultra-left which did, and it is for this reason alone that I take them seriously. For lack of a better terminology, I will call this particular

milieu of white insurrectionary anarchists and anti-authoritarian communists who fought in the uprising, the white ultra-left. There is also a Black ultra-left which fought in the uprising. And yet, even though Black ultra-leftists have written about race and organization, in the white ultra-left, the organizational form has largely been limited to the framework of urbanization, growth of factories, and common work experiences.¹ Little or no consideration is given to how race plays a crucial role in determining organizations, especially when revolutionaries from different racialized groups come together.

BLACK-WHITE POLITICAL INTIMACIES

Alongside class, I focus on the Black-white relationship because it is the dominant relationship in the United States, which determines all other relationships in the context of political intimacies. The Black-white relationship is ultimately an agenda setting relation in the US, which structures the path of mass struggle. The importance of this relationship has been lost from two vantage points. The first is from the perspective of BIPOCism², which assumes that darker skinned people have an inherent solidarity. This a-historical and over exaggerated claim has largely slowed down Black liberation in the United States. It posits the boogey man of the white proletariat in an effort to hide the lack of mass solidarity of people of color in regard to Black liberation. The second vantage point where this relationship has been lost is from the white ultra-left tradition, which in an attempt to leave the insidious politics of identity and privilege behind, loses sight of the American reality of race.

Organizational relations among Black and white revolutionaries are often constituted by an unspoken racial tension that is centered around matters of leadership, program, and everyday interactions. Whites tend to control the milieu, daily interactions with them can

1 See Sergio Bologna, "Class Composition and the Theory of the Party at the Origin of the Workers' Council Movement."

2 Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

1. Tactical unity against our common class enemies.
2. Developing intellectual defenses against the white outside agitator narrative, respectability politics, etc.
3. Broadly countering the statist and liberals who pose as revolutionaries, such as the Democratic Socialists of America and the Party for Socialism and Liberation.
4. Developing a political culture in which debates among revolutionaries are handled in a principled manner.
5. Fighting the far right and the fascists.
6. Fighting the various forms of the political counterinsurgency, in particular the Black counterinsurgency, which requires the expansion of the Black ultra-left.

be unpleasant, and there are often very few that actually understand race or Black liberation. When dynamics of race are discussed, this is often ridden with guilt, resentment, privilege and identity politics, instead of a historical and materialist analysis.

Revolutionary organizations were and still are one of the few spaces where Black and white people have the potential of meeting as political equals.³ However, this only remains a potential, perhaps no greater than or less than the potential of political equality in bourgeois society. If political equality in bourgeois society requires laws, voting, and access to legal power, then political equality in revolutionary organizations is premised on a certain kind of writing, talking, and reading of texts. This is how we might explain why Black revolutionaries so often feel that they are not heard—in effect they are not treated as political equals. Whites set the style, tone, manner, and traditions of writing, speaking, and listening, which are not neutral or objective, but constituted by race and class. It is a certain kind of person who thrives in revolutionary formations where the dominant activities are inseparable from the skills learned in college or graduate school.

Instead of finding itself surrounded by the multi-racial proletariat, the ultra-left remains an overwhelmingly white milieu, with a few Asian Americans and Latinx people. While there are obviously Black ultra-leftists in this country, they remain separate from the white milieu. My project for the last two decades has been to bring these two groups together, although this has proven to be particularly difficult. The white ultra-left, for reasons I will discuss below, has effectively jumped ship from its historical mission in this country, becoming lost in the European wilderness. The Black ultra-left, in reaction, has developed a hatred for white revolutionaries, often obscuring glaring weaknesses in its own ranks. I hope to show

3 Organizations cannot avoid the fact that comrades still meet as economic unequals, even if everyone is proletarian. This is inseparable from the political inequality which occurs in revolutionary organizations. It is the latter which is discussed most often, while economic inequality is often left unaddressed. What can be done by the organization regarding economic inequality is not clear.

that instead of two opposing camps, these are actually quarrelling siblings, mutually constituting each other's misery, ignorance, and failed politics.

RIOT AND ORGANIZATION

At the most general level, the era of large industrial factories was the arena where coordination of struggles could take place. The importance of this space as a meeting ground—to see faces, develop friendships, discuss strategy, and make plans—cannot be underestimated.

But the anti-police riots of the 1960s were located in a middle space between the era of large factories and today. The segregation experienced by Black workers in Northern cities created a particular type of space for coordination, allowing for a Black-urban-factory dynamic. But this dynamic was short lived and not at all widespread, as highlighted by the narrow geography and short life of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

The most salient feature of the 1960s was not the large memberships of revolutionary organizations, but that they were so small. This includes the largest and most important organization of that era, the Black Panther Party, which at its height had about 5,000 members, although its influence went much farther than its membership. While some might point to the Black Liberation Army, this was actually a tiny organization in comparison. And while both the Panthers and the BLA benefited from the radicalization produced by the riots, in no case was there a direct relationship between riot and organization.

Part of the difficulty arises from the very circumstances of the riot. Unlike workplace struggles, where workers can potentially develop a more intimate perspective of each other, urban rebellions are composed overwhelmingly of strangers. Anyone who was in the 2020 riots could not have failed to notice that most people, regardless of race, were there with a friend or two, and for the most part did not know anyone else. Furthermore, the dangerous and fast-paced nature of the riot makes it very hard to learn much about

this will be done is not the purpose of this essay, but some methodological guidelines can start the process. First off, it must begin with both camps historicizing themselves. Neither side is objective or above history, but products of class struggle, capitalism, and race. Keeping this in mind, white revolutionaries have to be less arrogant, and many Black revolutionaries have to work on their own inferiority complexes. Being honest about this always proves to be difficult, but this is the dominant psychological dynamic in our society, otherwise white supremacy and anti-Blackness have no meaning.

The romance that each side has of itself has to come to an end. There is little to be romantic about regarding either the past or the present. Capitalism and the racial order continue to reign supreme. None of the past struggles have been able to vanquish them.

The purpose of being in revolutionary is to participate in the overthrow of the state, the racial order, capitalism, empire, patriarchy, and other miseries. This entails immense risk and danger. The problem is that there are few material or ethical stakes involved in any of the revolutionary formations which exist today. The George Floyd Uprising was a small moment when such stakes emerged, but when the moment passed, such formations returned to being no more than publishing centers, friendship circles, and book clubs. Such low stakes affairs hardly require working with one another.

What is noticeable is that during the George Floyd Uprising and subsequent revolts, the discussion of microaggressions seemed to disappear, and the reason is obvious. All of a sudden, cop cars were on fire, police stations were under attack, and Gucci stores were being looted.

If we can keep our eyes on the prize, we might find a different way of dealing with political intimacies. This does not mean that revolutionaries have to be friends, but at minimum, they must accept a basic level of camaraderie, coordination, and communication. This does not necessarily require that Black and white people be in the same revolutionary group, but it does require some level of agreement on the following points:

ry Haywood, and CLR James. Some found the relationships to be full of love and an invaluable part of their life. We should not forget this. Perhaps the most well-known exploration of the Black-white relationship is Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*, which ultimately sought a way out of the perverse racist dynamics fostered in a colonial world. The effort to leave this world, not only requires a revolution, but the recognition that anyone can change. This should still be our goal today. People should be able to love anyone they want because revolution is the expansion of love, not its contraction.

TO BE CONTINUED

Approaching this problem with the proper perspective is key. The reality is that these debates involve a small group of people, who have almost no impact on any large-scale struggles. These debates are not about changing the course of world history, but about self-clarification, and figuring out something about ourselves.

With this in mind, perhaps we can approach these tense issues with some humility. There are several approaches. One is for both Black and white revolutionaries to simply ignore each other. The milieus and their respective influences are so small, it might be better to just focus on one's respective work. 99.99% of the world does not know the ultra-left even exists. Who cares if it is Euro-centric, white, etc.? Why not ignore it? This is one option.

The second option is for Black and white ultra-leftists to continue with their sectarianism. Black revolutionaries diss the white ultra-left for being anti-Black, and white revolutionaries diss the Black ultra-left for being identity politicians. This approach leaves no room for solving the problems facing either milieu. If history is any guide, both groups will age, become irrelevant, and eventually this process will start all over again with a fresh set of teenage revolutionaries. In this scenario, there is no change, only endless repetition.

The third option is for both sides to sit down and do something different. While this has proven to be very difficult, it seems to be the only choice where something new can actually emerge. How

other rioters, except in the most abstract sense. All of this has a significant impact in terms of forming an organization on the basis of the riot.

This limit results in all kinds of conclusions regarding the white ultra-left: on the one extreme, the white rioters are seen as racist agitators trying to cause trouble, and on the other extreme they are perceived as John Browns or Antifa. Maybe they are, maybe they are not. It is hard to know, since the very nature of the riot obscures more intimate knowledge of others.

Perhaps it is still possible to form large multi-racial reformist organizations, as the growth of the Democratic Socialists of America suggests. But when it comes to revolutionary organizations and riots, the best we can expect is for many small groups to form after the uprising. This should temper anyone's arrogance around these questions.

BLACK REVOLUTIONARIES AND ORGANIZATION

Black revolutionaries today have trouble building revolutionary organizations that are majority Black. Why? There are many reasons for this and arguably no single explanation can do justice, but we can begin with a bird's eye view. Black people are about 14% of the population. This means that the pool of Black people to draw revolutionaries from is smaller than whites. To the extent that the American revolutionary scene draws from the middle class and college educated, this also narrows the lottery of Black revolutionaries. 26% of Black people over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree. This is below the national average of 36%.⁴ In contrast, 40% of whites hold a bachelor's degree. College is still a key place where networks, contacts, skills, and publications are hatched, which develop into revolutionary milieus.

While there has been much discussion of the Black middle class since the George Floyd Uprising, it should not be forgotten that Black graduates earn less, have less dense networks of support

4 <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/06/black-high-school-attainment-nearly-on-par-with-national-average.html>

when they are arrested or fired from a job for political activity, and also can have more family responsibilities. This precarity has resulted in a hunker down mentality of survival, where post-college Black graduates remain focused on career advancement and at best, group advancement, but not the overthrow of a system. The most recent development of the last decade in this regard is that capitalists have funded Black NGOs throughout the country, absorbing many potential Black revolutionaries.⁵ An equally important development is the complete co-optation of the Black Radical Tradition in the academy.⁶

The Black Radical Tradition has been mainly interpreted as Black social democracy and ultimately turned into another commodity to be sold and consumed by college students.⁷ This has created an intellectual environment that is highly reformist. Despite the growing popularity of Black anarchism in the past two decades, Black revolutionaries still tend to be organizational vanguardists, statist, and workerists, for fairly reasonable and materialist reasons. Unlike white revolutionaries, who could organically rely on their racial and class privileges, Black revolutionaries needed an independent organizational apparatus to create highly educated and talented militants—think of Du Bois’ talented tenth.

For anti-state revolutionaries, the Black struggle has presented itself as an anti-state movement. In one sense this is correct, after all, Black struggles are antagonistic towards the state. A closer examination, however, reveals something more. Black movements are antagonistic towards the state, but they have been less rooted in the desire for the destruction of the state, than in reforming it. The most important target has been the Federal Government. Unable to make an alliance with white proletarians, Black struggles have had to constitute a node of power (or alliance) at the center of the US State, whether during the Civil War, Reconstruction, the workers

5 This is not entirely new, as Robert Allen shows in *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*.

6 See Joy James’s talk “The Architects of Abolition.”

7 If this is confusing, the 2nd International is a good comparison. Revolutionary in words, reformist in deeds.

closer look shows that among Latinx people, it is almost as likely that the husband will be white as Latinx. Among Asian-Americans, it is even more likely that the husband will be white. In contrast, among Black people, it is still more likely that the husband in a Black-white marriage will be Black. Furthermore, white men are less likely to marry Black women than any other demographic. Of course, this discussion of marriage is skewed towards the college educated and middle class, since proletarian marriage rates are lower.

To return our discussion to the terms of how the ultra-left has usually understood organizations, it rarely, if ever, mentions the particularities of white women. But in the context of the US, this simply cannot be ignored. White women are potentially so explosive, that their subjectivity plays a role in blocking the cohering of organization. This contradiction is not reducible to sexual encounters but opens up a vast set of social and political problems, which are beyond the scope of this essay.

Of course, there are some important caveats regarding white women. We cannot be in a rush to map past experiences onto the present. We will need evidence before any grand claims can be made for the current era. We should also remember that white women are not one homogenous class of people either. Many white women have been devastated by opioids, poverty, and the pandemic. A growing number find themselves in prison as well. These proletarian trends do not internally shape the ultra-left milieu, because of class differences, but they are worth noting. This reveals that the category of the “white woman” is not as robust as it used to be during the era of Jim Crow.

This very cursory and brief investigation is not meant to absolve white men, nor to make any grand claim about how sex and love are doomed for Black and white people, let alone Black and white organizations. But the fact is that white women have been complicit in white supremacy, so making sense of their role as whites and as women is critical.

Some of the great Black revolutionaries of the 20th century were in romantic relationships with white women — Frantz Fanon, Har-

them also raped Black men. And in their homes, white women were often the bosses of Black domestic workers, while their white husbands were sexually violating their so-called sisters.

When white women and Black revolutionaries were in the same groups, like the CPUSA or SNCC, an explosive element was being thrown into an already tense set of relationships, especially when Black men and white women had romantic relationships. Were white women racist in these organizational encounters, imagining the super sexual powers of Black men? Could white women see Black men as humans instead of racial epithets? Could white women see Black men as individuals instead of representatives of an entire group? Were white women sleeping with Black men just to recruit them? Were white women using Black men to escape or take revenge on their own families? Could white women have an equal relationship with Black men? Could Black men have desires that were not based on revenge of the master's prized possession: the white woman?

Black women revolutionaries resented the situation. White women who dated Black men in these milieus were removing the small number of Black men from the pool of potential romantic partners. This created an anger not only towards white women, but towards Black men, for not being loyal to the race. Hence the phrase, "Talking Black, but sleeping white."

There are so little Black-white interactions today in revolutionary milieus, it is unclear if these past patterns will continue, although we can get a sense of how problematic these racial sexual dynamics still are by looking at who marries who. The data on multi-racial marriages helps put the current patterns in perspective.¹⁰

The big story is that Latinx-white marriages dominate. The other story is that Black-white marriages are equally important, but in a different sense. While sexual intimacies and marriages have increased between Black people and white people, whites are still more likely to marry Asians or Latinx people than Black people. A

10 <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2017/05/18/1-trends-and-patterns-in-intermarriage/>

movement, or the Civil Rights movement. This is a structural reality that still shapes US politics today, and which tends to further narrow the pool of Black revolutionaries in the ultra-left.

THE WHITE ULTRA-LEFT

It is not entirely unfair to call white ultra-left circles one or more of the following: Euro-centric, white-centric, ignorant of race, scared of race, defeated by race, and class reductionist. Part of the reason for this is that privilege and identity politics have dominated US politics, which has led many white revolutionaries to look for other traditions—always in Europe—to develop revolutionary politics, because developing it out of Black struggles would have been seen as whites "stepping out of place." In the few places where race was discussed in the white ultra-left, it was usually through Afropessimism, which was certainly honorable, but ultimately only a philosophical attempt to save the question of revolution. The move to Afropessimism made sense as a response to the fact that the Black Radical Tradition was no longer revolutionary.⁸ But Afropessimism provided no actual knowledge of how to navigate race, class, and the Black Radical Tradition, other than in a crude militant sense. While this was certainly better than social-democratic politics, it was not robust enough to tackle the concrete reality of race in the US.

White ultra-left circles have immense difficulty in seeing Black revolutionaries as contributing to their specific projects. On questions of organization, strategy, and program, the tendency is to see an overwhelmingly European genealogy. To participate in most of these milieus requires an extensive knowledge of the particular vocabulary, historical references, and concepts they use, which are usually based in Europe. While BIPOC revolutionaries have raised this issue in the past, they have been met with silence, condescension, and outright dismissal. The Black Radical tradition tends to

8 See Joy James's "The Architects of Abolition"; Harold Cruses's *Rebellion or Revolution*, Dean Robinson's *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought*, and Paul Gilroy's *Against Race*.

be read in a cynical manner. It's almost as if this milieu sees "Blackness" as a hindrance to revolution. While Fanon, CLR James, and others have made important contributions to the broader ultra-left tradition, they seem to be ignored again and again.

A small layer of BIPOC revolutionaries have reached anti-state and anti-capitalist conclusions in the US, but the ultra-left whites just cannot seem to relate to this milieu in any intelligent manner. It is possible that all of this reflects a much deeper racism in the white ultra-left. The history of race and class in this country points to the real possibility that many white revolutionaries will betray the Black struggle at some point. Perhaps the task of Black revolutionaries is to make a tactical alliance, expecting a betrayal, but going as far as possible. This will require a more Machiavellian style of politics akin to what CLR James laid out in *The Black Jacobins*. Often times, politics is working with people you do not trust, in an effort to defeat a common enemy. Perhaps out of that effort, a different relationship can be born.

My hope is that the impact of the George Floyd Uprising will make a dent in the thinking and practice of the white ultra-left. Considerable growth first began with the rebellions around Oscar Grant's murder in 2009. It has developed in fits and starts. Some portions of the white ultra-left started writing about these rebellions, attempting to address the specific dynamics of race and Black liberation. This grew with the riots in Ferguson in 2014. *Endnotes* published a lengthy essay "Brown v. Ferguson." *Ill Will* also played a role in popularizing Afropessimism. While my disagreements with the latter are clear, these efforts are not avoiding race, Eurocentric, or anti-Black. It was noticeable that publications such as *Ill Will* and *Hard Crackers* became clearing houses for writings on the George Floyd uprising, often publishing texts which had race centric and even Black centric perspectives. *Ill Will* has also recently turned towards a specific focus on race traitors. There are some people in this milieu who have been powerfully shaped by the uprising and by the historic Black liberation movements. Their perspectives might not always be visible in some of these publications, but they are part of the milieu.

Black liberation's strength has been to parse out the various types of whites in our society. Continuing that practice will be crucial in finding coalition partners, comrades, and accomplices. Partisans of Black liberation should be able to separate the whites who are Proud Boys, liberals, or pseudo-revolutionary, from those who are willing to show up at the barricades.

In a society permeated with anti-Blackness, even the most dedicated anti-racist whites cannot fully escape the conditioning of anti-Blackness. This means deciding which errors merit punching whites, breaking with them entirely, politically splitting from them, or correcting them and remaining in the same group. The white ultra-left is certainly not perfect on the race question, but if we expect to have 100% agreement with the people we fight with in the streets, then we may never find more than a handful of actual comrades.

WHAT HAPPENED TO WHITE WOMEN?

The standard measure for racism is often the cis-heterosexual white man.⁹ This occurs over questions of who is writing, who is speaking, and who is doing militant street actions. In the arena of sex, the focus is on white men as well, seen as potential predators of women. This has not always been the case. Some of this was due to the patriarchy of white men, but another figure was equally if not more problematic and explosive — white women in Black-white organizations. Why has the white woman receded from the story of revolutionary organization and political intimacies? This is not at all clear, nor is it the particular focus of this section. This is only an initial attempt to start a very difficult conversation in the era of intersectionality and the #MeToo movement.

Historically, particularly in the South, white women were put on a pedestal in a racist imagination, where they would be protected from Black men's sexual desires. Not only were white women involved in the lynching of Black men by white men, but some of

9 The focus on Black white sexual relationships is exclusively involving cis-hetero people.