



**THE RISE
OF BLACK
COUNTER
INSURGENCY**

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Cover photo: tear gas canister in downtown Portland, July 27 2020.

INTRODUCTION

From May 26 to June 1, 2020, a Black led multi-racial proletarian rebellion burned down police stations, destroyed cop cars, attacked police, redistributed goods, and took revenge for the murder of countless Black and non-Black people by the police. By the first week of June, everything seemed to have changed, everyone seemed to have forgotten that any of this happened, and instead we became good protestors, we became non-violent, and we became reformists. Instead of attacking police, we endured countless marches with no point other than to continue marching. From revolutionary abolitionists, we became reformist abolitionists. What happened?

There are many easy answers, all of them incorrect. One potential answer would point to the police repression of the movement, which resulted in over 14,000 people being arrested. Another would point to the white people who joined the movement, and who brought with them all their liberal politics and strategies. Finally, the most ridiculous answer of all maintains that the militant phase of the rebellion was never a real movement of Black and non-Black proletarians to begin with, but was in fact a product of outside agitators.

In reality, something much more dangerous and sinister took place, something organic to racial capitalism, and with roots extending back to the African slave trade and the Haitian Revolution. A counter-insurgency campaign has fundamentally altered the course of the movement. While the retreat and defeat of the movement that it induced may turn out to be temporary, such campaigns present significant obstacles to further radicalization, and therefore must be addressed. This counter-insurgency campaign on the ground was spearheaded by the Black middle class, Black politicians, Black radical academics, and Black NGOs. This may come as a shock to people whose impulse is to think of Black people as a monolithic political group. This conception is false.

This was not a local phenomenon in one or two cities, but a dynamic that has taken place across the United States. A widespread rebellion demanded a widespread counter-insurgency. And while there is no doubt that behind the Black-led counter-insurgency lie billion-dollar philanthropies, universities, the state, and the white middle class, the uncomfortable truth is that a Black-led rebellion could only be crushed by a Black-led counter-insurgency program. None of this could have taken place if there were not a significant layer of Black counter-insurgents across the United States.

The rise of the Black middle class is an organic development of class stratification under racial capitalism. It is the starting point for understanding the counter-insurgency that is presently strangling the George Floyd Rebellion. The latter has its social basis in the Black middle class, who seek at most a narrow reform of the system, namely, the transformation of racial capitalism into simple capitalism.

In the long run, the Black middle class is the enemy of the Black proletariat: the unemployed, waged workers, sex workers, etc. The true partners or accomplices of the Black proletariat are the Latinx and white proletarians, Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island and the international proletariat. So far, few in this country seem to have figured this out, let alone what political and strategic implications follow from it. Although none of these problems are new, it is worth returning to them once again.

THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS

There has always been a tension in the struggle for Black liberation over the question of the Black middle class: doctors, lawyers, professors, managers, and business owners. Not over its existence, but over its political role and behavior in the struggle against white supremacy.

In many ways, the Black middle class is no different from other middle classes. At their core, all middle class politics are electoral, legislative, and reformist. Their strategies are about respectability, the protection of private property, and ultimately about following the law. Middle classes have always felt entitled to speak for and represent their respective proletariats. They advocate for multi-racial unity amongst their class peers, at the same time as they use racial loyalty to advance their own positions under racial capitalism. All middle class analysis sees the proletariat as its threat or victim; none see the proletariat as a revolutionary class. Those few middle class people who see the proletariat as revolutionary either work to repress the latter, or else wind up joining them in struggle.

In 1931, W.E.B. Du Bois argued that so long as Jim Crow limited the Black middle class's opportunities, the Black proletariat and the Black middle class needed to fight together against white supremacy. By the 1960's, however, the Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers were already convinced that the Black middle class and Black proletariat had parted company. With the defeat of Jim Crow in the 1960s, middle class Black people found a path to success, resulting in vast differences between themselves and their dispossessed neighbors.

The movement to defeat Jim Crow did not destroy racial capitalism or anti-Blackness; rather, while it opened up new avenues for a small handful of Black people, their victory at the same time became a devastating defeat for the masses of Black proletarians who remain stuck in their miserable conditions, with the sole difference that their workplaces and neighborhoods are now managed and policed by the 'victorious' Black middle class. In this respect, the Black middle class is not entirely lying when it casts itself as the culmination of the Civil

Rights Movement and Black Power. These contradictions existed prior to the movements of the 1960's, and they have never been clarified on a mass level ever since. The Black middle class has been, and remains to this day, the contradiction of the Black Liberation Movement.

The essential difference between the Black middle class and the white middle class is *strategic*: the Black middle class uses Black proletarian struggles to advance its own cause. Since it is not strong enough to advance its cause on its own, it leverages the fear of riots and street protests to push its own agenda. The Black middle class cannot completely dissociate itself from the militant phase of the rebellion because it needs to wield riots and violence as a potential threat over the rest of society. At the same time, the Black middle class cannot identify itself with the riot, because to do so would contradict its own desire to be integrated into the capitalist state, whose laws and order secure the existence of private property.

The result is a confused and contradictory relation marked by a triple dynamic: (i) the Black middle class strives to achieve the wealth and power of the white middle class, (ii) yet this requires it be willing to discipline the Black proletariat, (iii) with whom it nonetheless shares a sense of linked fate driven by the police's and other white people's inability to distinguish poor Black people from the hood from their suburban counterparts. This threefold dynamic finds expression in the general thrust of mainstream Black Lives Matter protests, whose middle class activists advocate simultaneously (i) for police to stop confusing the Black middle class with Black people from the hood, (ii) for the state to spend more money on social reproduction in the hopes of catapulting more Black people into the Black middle class, and (iii) to create more positions for the Black middle class in universities, corporate board rooms, etc.

All of Black middle class society is poised to gain from the efforts of Black proletarians. In the coming months, the victories won from the rebellion will come in the form of the new and worthless 'diversity' positions, pointless academic conferences and articles, and pitiful salary bumps. For now, the current protests must maintain their parasitic relationship with the initial George Floyd Rebellion. Following the mili-

tant phase of the rebellion, protests have gone into a zombie-like phase of endless marches, often through already empty streets and highways. It is as if police stations were never sieged, smashed, and burned down. Protest after protest happens, without a meaningful reflection upon what took place that first week. Whereas 2014 introduced highway blockades to the tactical repertoire of anti-police struggle, we might have thought “burnt precincts” would be remembered as Minneapolis’ contribution. Instead, the advances made in Minneapolis are being buried under the street marches across the country, as Black leadership reinforces reactionary divisions between peaceful and good protestors.

REVOLUTIONARY VERSUS REFORMIST ABOLITION

There are two kinds of abolition: revolutionary abolition and reformist abolition. Revolutionary abolition is the self-activity of the proletariat in fighting against the entire carceral logic of the state and racial capitalism. This includes burning down police stations, destroying cop cars, attacking police officers, and redistributing goods from Target and Versace. Revolutionary abolitionism stands in alliance with revolutionary anti-capitalism, since it grasps that abolition is only possible when tied to anti-capitalism, anti-statism, anti-imperialism, anti-homophobia, and anti-patriarchy. Prisons have to be abolished, but so do schools, social workers, and the army of middle-class institutions and do gooders. The expansive dynamism that it names therefore cannot stop with the police, but must extend its attack to the wall separating the so-called United States and Mexico, to detention centers, to courts, and the vast infrastructure of the carceral state and capitalism.

Revolutionary abolitionism quickly reached a boiling point during the first week of the rebellion, with a resurgence again this past week on July 25th. In the interim, revolutionary abolition was largely displaced by a reformist abolition, a current largely defined by the activity and politics of professional activists, NGOs, lawyers, and politicians, and concerned primarily with ‘defunding’, policy, and legislative shifts. This perspective continues to see politicians as the principal historical actors, in relation to whom it positions itself as a pressure group. In

this way, reformist abolitionism removes proletarians from the terrain of struggle.

While it is correct to observe the gross injustice of police budgets by contrast with expenditures on health, infrastructure, school and other services, proposals to ‘defund’ amount to little more than a monetary displacement from one portion of the state to another. Moreover, even when reformist abolitionism begins to imagine abolishing the police, as is the case right now in Minneapolis, it cannot seem to grasp that the police cannot be abolished by legislation. What the reformist abolitionism fails to see is that it has always and only ever been actual or feared revolutionary wars that abolished slavery. The shortest path to dismantling police and prisons is and has always been through revolt, as we saw last year when the uprising in Haiti led to entire prisons being emptied. Insurrection forms the centerpiece of revolutionary abolition.

In light of revolutionary abolition surfacing in the country with attacks on DHS offices in Atlanta and the burning of courthouses, reformist abolition is a direct attack on these more militant means of abolition. Nowhere has this tension and relationship between reformist abolition and revolutionary abolition been more fraught than in Minneapolis. Reformists had been preparing for years in Minneapolis and the rebellion provided them with the leverage to make their move. What began as an all out assault on the forces of law and order in Minneapolis has since been transformed into a plethora of anodyne political projects. As the Black proletariat recedes, the Black professional activist comes to the front, until all is good and holy again.

NGOS AND ACADEMICS

Black non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including the groups in the Movement for Black Lives, have played a key role in this counterinsurgency campaign. Their social base is not the Black proletariat, but the Black middle class and—most importantly—the white bourgeoisie, through the mediation of philanthropies. In order to co-opt the movement, the bourgeoisie is throwing money at problems generated by racial capitalism. In the NGO, they have found a willing

group of people who will happily accept their dollars. Money is falling from the sky: if you are Black, middle class, and can say Black Lives Matter three times, money will magically appear in your lap. While these NGOs vary politically, they tend to have little or no background in struggle, no particular concern for movements, and ultimately no interest in overthrowing racial capitalism. They are merely a reflection of the various parasites sucking the blood from the historic struggle of Black proletarians. They solve nothing in the long run, and it is unlikely any of them will actually lead the movement, since they have no base. However, because the movement generated by the George Floyd Rebellion is new, many of its participants are still easily confused, and thus continue to display a servile willingness to follow any Black person that shows up with a megaphone. While it is inevitable that some NGO activists will once again split away from their groups and join the more radical elements in the movement, any strategic orientation that centers their potential energy is mistaken. Waiting around for the radicalization of the NGOs is like waiting around for unions to radicalize. Somehow, NGOs must eventually be kicked out of the movement.

And what of the so-called “revolutionary Black intellectuals.” Since the word “revolutionary” is meaningless in non-revolutionary times, and the restricted practice of being an “intellectual” is rendered inoperative during revolutionary times, we’re dealing with a contradiction in terms. Whereas in non-revolutionary times the activities of academic intellectuals reflect the standard capitalist division of labor between thinkers and manual workers, in insurrectional moments the division of labor tends to collapse and be rearranged, such that many proletarians suddenly find themselves engaged in forms of reading, writing, and theorizing that had previously been the exclusive task of intellectuals.

Let it be said clearly: the George Floyd Rebellion is the new criterion to which all theories and politics must be held to account. Not to tenure demands, not to academic journals, not to a community of so-called scholars, but the fire and heat of the proletarian struggle. They must answer to the demands of riots, strikes, occupations, blockades, insurrections, war, and revolution. And in this regard, it must be admitted that the results have so far been a disaster. Black Marxism, Afro-poss-

mism, Black Anarchism, and Black Feminism have all been put to the test in this uprising, and all have failed. These theories have had little to no meaningful impact on the Black proletariat. In certain cases, they have even enhanced their careers by lending their voice to counter-insurgent NGOs who are only too happy to pay an honorarium.

What happened to Black revolutionary theory? For over fifty years, theories have been hiding in the academy. The university has completely commodified Black radical thought, which has divorced it from Black proletarians by determining who has access to it and who is able make sense of its dense and obtuse language. The issues and questions that matter to the Black proletariat are never addressed on the terms, concepts, and traditions of the Black proletariat, but instead are discussed on the much narrower and reformist terms of the academy. No idea in the academy is accountable to the Black proletariat, against whom a tenured job offers the radical academic the ultimate insulation. This lack of accountability protects outdated and useless ideas, allowing dusty old theories that were long ago defeated in the actual class struggle to continue to live on in the academy, becoming a dead weight on the movement's brain.

This stops now. The full force of a rebellion has cleared the debris in a manner that critique could never accomplish. Although the political consolidation of the rebellion has fallen to the Black counter-insurgents for now, the George Floyd Rebellion has allowed the next generation of Black revolutionaries from the proletariat, as well as and some renegade middle class people, to emerge and catch sight of itself. In the upcoming months and years, we must do what we can to help them unburden themselves of the false divisions of intellectual activity and revolutionary activity that have long plagued our movements.

CONCLUSION

If capitalism is ever to be abolished, if a liberatory communist future will ever see the light of day, the proletariat must emancipate itself by force from its dependency on the bourgeois social order. But before the antagonism can reach this point, another battle must also take place,

in which the Black proletariat politically and materially settles its accounts with the Black middle class. This is not a new reality but one with which every revolution involving Black people has had to wrestle. So far the Black proletariat has lost every one of these struggles, resulting in a capitalism and state with a Black face.

If the Black middle class has been able to wage the counter-insurgency so effectively, this is in part due to the fact that it has captured key parts of the state. Lori Lightfoot in Chicago, Keisha Lance Bottoms in Atlanta, Chokwe Antar Lumumba in Jackson, and Bernard Young in Baltimore offer just a few examples of an aspirational managerial tier that is conscious of its class interests in a manner that the Black proletariat has yet to figure out. They attend the best schools in the country, allowing them to mobilize the kind of cynical arguments that are needed to articulate a reformist and counter insurgent program.

The middle classes have their universities, elections, corporations, and other institutions to develop their version of the rainbow coalition. The proletariat is left outside of the process.

The Black proletariat can lead and spark the struggle, but will win no decisive battles without accomplices in the white and Latinx proletariat, and Indigenous nations. As it cleaned out as many stores as it could, the Black proletariat fought together with other proletarians. For one week, an organic alliance was built, as different oppressed groups rained fire on police and redistributed goods across Turtle Island.

However, these organic alliances do not automatically lead to more permanent alliances. The gigantic eruptions of solidarity in riots and uprisings tend to quickly retreat back into antagonistic relations amongst proletarians soon after. After all, sharing a moment of combat is not the same as forging long-term trust and solidarity. What is more real, one week of shared unity or a life-time of proletarian conflict with one another?

The Black proletariat faces job competition, housing competition, and the struggle for other scarce resources against other proletarians. The respective middle classes promise to secure these goodies as long as Black proletarians continue to vote for Black politicians, Latinx proletarians vote for Latinx politicians, and so on. Although this logic is a

dead end for proletarian multi-racial solidarity, it serves short term aims that are often difficult to ignore for dispossessed folks. In this way, the fragile unity forged in moments of revolt are dissolved back into the separated social relationships of everyday life. Proletarians occasionally build solidarity with each other on a daily level, but on the whole they lack the mechanisms or institutions in racial capitalism to develop this unity. This is why attacks on the infrastructure of capitalism are so key and why new spaces of social reproduction are vital.

Nonetheless, our wager must be that the uprising has changed the proletariat. We have to believe that in the possibility that everyday relations are also beginning to change. This is a guess, and must be tested in battle.

Ultimately, some kind of larger process of crisis—war, economic crisis, pandemics, ecological collapse—will be required to force a strategic unity between the different racialized groups of proletarians. Without fetishizing organizations, some organizational forms will be needed to crystalize and concentrate this alliance. The proletariat will have to develop its own class-race-gender interests against the Black and white middle class simultaneously through action, organization, and program.

Since the 2007/2008 economic crisis the entire world has entered a period of mass struggle. It has been uneven, Greece one moment, the Arab Spring the next, Marikana another, or Haiti, with respective counter-revolutions or counter-insurgency as part of the process. The George Floyd Rebellion is part of this ongoing process to deal with the massive inequality, police violence, and other forms of oppression. I have emphasized defeat-retreat in the current moment, because that is what we immediately face. But in the near future, the movement will attack once again, because there will be no other choice. Defeat is temporary, struggle is permanent.

REFERENCES

While I did not cite any references, the following works informed my argument and analysis:

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