Social Class and the Revolutionary Politics of the Black Liberation Movement: The Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers

Mikhail Pronilover

The recent police killings of black people, and the public response in cities like Oakland, California and Ferguson, Missouri raise a question that has been unresolved since the conclusion of the Civil Rights Movement: Are black people *really* free and equal now in the United States? The emergence of large protests and the Black Lives Matter Movement, address the first issue and highlight another: How do we get freedom and equality? This was the same question that confronted black revolutionaries in the 1960s, who believed the Civil Rights Movement, though extending important gains for black people, did not achieve equality and freedom. In 1969, two of the most influential and left-wing political organizations of the Black Power Era, the Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, were at the peak of their influence.[1] And they had a plan to deliver freedom and equality.

Liberal historians sympathetic to the Black Power movements, in particular the Black Panther Party, have written the narrative of these organizations as part of the struggle for radical reform of U.S. democratic institutions.[2] While challenging standard accounts that demonize revolutionary Black Power organizations as hot fire-brands bent on violence, the liberal narrative rescues these movements by diminishing the basic political ideologies that animated them; more often, the revolutionary ideologies are treated as rhetoric or political theatrics.[3] At the same time, studies like the recently published *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*, is an exhaustive account of the Panther Party but fails to provide more than a cursory review of their theory and ideology.[4] Utilizing newspaper articles and documents from the Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and Robert L. Allen's 1969 classic *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* as emblematic of the radical black politics of the era,[5] this article seeks to analyze the political content of revolutionary Black Power organizations in the late 1960s.

This paper shows that the rise of revolutionary black organizations was linked to limitations in the Civil Rights Movement and a process of class division and growing radicalization of the black freedom struggle, and that the political ideas reached by the Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers marked a significant departure from the old liberal Civil Rights organizations. This is accomplished by tracing the basic theory and ideology of the Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. First, against the backdrop of persisting poverty and segregation in the urban cities of the North, it reviews the transformation of the dominant Civil Rights narrative that saw in racism a problem of morality solvable by reforms, to an anti-capitalist politic that linked black oppression to exploitation and the rule of profit. This led to an important practical and theoretical effort to combine struggles of race and self-determination with socialism and equality. Second,

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[1] Peniel E. Joseph, "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field," *The Journal of American History* 96 (2009): 759-760. According to Peniel E. Joseph, the recognized start of the Black Power Era is 1965, following the Watts Riots of that year where residents rebutted Martin Luther King's calls for nonviolence, King's failure to deliver results over open housing in Chicago, and Stokely Carmichael's election as chairman of SNCC.

[2] Joseph's, 762-767, including review of Alkebulan, and conclusion on 772; Robert O. Self, *American Babylon* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), 226-27, 232, 298-316.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire*: *The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). Theoretical discussion is limited to a few pages in the third chapter. Nowhere is L*umpenproletariat* mentioned or the reason for the Panthers' orientation towards them, aside from Newton's affinity for the "brothers on the block."

[5] Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2002).

this new politics is connected to a class cleavage within the movement shown by the Panthers and League's criticism of the moderate leadership and their opposition to black capitalism. Third, it will argue that the League's turn to the black working-class and the Panthers towards the black *Lumpenproletariat*, and their declaration of political independence from the Democratic Party, is what signified the most threatening opposition to the government. By further comparing the Panthers' and the League's positions on social class and social vanguard, the intellectual debates and a key difference inside the radical Black Power Movement are examined. Finally, by reviewing the specific debate over a black united front, this paper proposes that unresolved questions over how to combine self-determination and socialism were central to the crisis and collapse of the League and the Panthers in the 1970s.

Searching for the Roots: Rise of Anti-Capitalist Politics in the Black Liberation Movement

By the mid-1960s, the Civil Rights Movement was at a stalemate as it reached the cities of the North. More than a decade of struggles led to the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act, but the prominent organizations and leaders had no answer to the persistence of exploitation and poverty in the urban ghettos in spite of these victories. Urban black communities primarily composed of workers and marginalized people saw too few social, economic, and spatial benefits from civil rights legislation. De facto exclusion and segregation continued to characterize the urban black experience. In 1966, black mean income remained 60 percent of white income, while poverty affected over 34 percent of the black population.[6] Further, "the black subemployment rate, which reflects part-time work, discouraged workers and low-paid workers, was 33 percent in 1966 in the 'worst' areas of nine major cities."[7] A survey cited by Robert Allen concluded increased rates of segregation in eight of twelve cities the same year.[8] The paper of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, the *Inner City Voice*, had a special column that was dedicated to the economics of racism, which pointed out that while the total unemployment rate in 1970 was heading to 6 percent, "about 45% of [those unemployed] will be black." Meanwhile, the scourge of hunger affected "over 20 million people" out of which "13 million are black."[9] It was this economic and social situation that the new generation of black activists tried to address the limitations of the Civil Rights Movement.

[6] U.S. Census Bureau, Historical Income Tables: People, Table P-4. https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/people/ (accessed February 28, 2016); U.S. Census Bureau, Historical Poverty Tables- Families: Table 4, https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/historical/families.html (accessed February 28, 2016); Allen, 26, produces similar numbers on income and poverty. The figures today do not look more promising. According to a 2004 Martin Luther King Day Report, it will take "581 years to achieve income parity" at the current rate of racial progress. Madeleine Baran, "MLK Day Report Shows Greater Disparity Between Black and White," *The New Standard*, April 27 2007, http://newstandardnews.net/content/?action=show_item&itemid=116 (accessed February 28, 2016).

[7] Allen, 26-27.

[8] Ibid. An advocate of the domestic colonial model of black oppression close to the outlook of the Black Panther Party in 1969, Allen's work does an exceptional job in charting the rise of the revolutionary nationalist movement and the other black political forces it contended with.

[9] "Blacks Are the First to Lose," *Inner City Voice*, June 1970.



Figure 1. "Statistics on Black Exploitation," *Inner City Voice*, February 1971.

Since the extension of democratic rights did not solve the social or economic problems affecting the masses of black people, the Panthers and the League concluded that the problem lay with the economic structure of society. Eldridge Cleaver, Minister of Information and spokesperson of the Black Panther Party, explained the cause of the continued deprivations in the black community:

> Economically, we are at the mercy of the exploiters, businessmen, storeowners, merchants... We have no control over the land... We have no control over the machines and factories... We have no control over the wholesale and retail establishments... From beginning to end, we have no control over the economic process.[10]

While it was only in the last year of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life that he publicly recognized the economic aspect of black oppression and called for a program of "a redistribution of economic power,"[11]the critique of capitalism formed the basis of Panther and League analysis. Cofounder and leading theoretician of the Black Panther Party, Huey P. Newton, saw in capitalism a system "where a small group of men has another and larger group of men enslaved for profit...He who controls production and consumption controls everyone in society."[12] Similarly, the League wrote that in the United States, "a small class owns the means of production" and saw this as linked to a society that "is racist, capitalist, and imperialist by nature."[13]

The evolution of an anti-capitalist politic in the Black Liberation struggle had its social roots in the persistence of social inequality in spite of civil rights advances. This turn towards anti-capitalism had two important consequences. (1) It led to a sharpening of class and political antagonisms within the movement itself and, as will be described, (2) pushed black activists who would compose organizations like the Panthers and the League to search for a different social subject- other than the middle class- to lead the black liberation movement.

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[10] Eldridge Cleaver, "Community Imperialism," *The Black Panther*, May 18, 1968.
[11] Jose Yglesias. "It may be a Long, Hot Spring in the Capital." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Mar 31, 1968, http://search.proquest.com/docview/118211002?accountid=10352 (accessed March 2, 2016), Qtd. in Bloom, 116.
[12] Huey P. Newton, "The Black Panthers," *The Black Panther Saturday*, August 23, 1969.
[13] "General Policy Statement," *Inner City Voice*, November-December, 1970.

"The years of TOM are over"

While victory over Jim Crow resulted in the desegregation of public facilities, increased voter registration, and some degree of school integration, it became evident to many that "the black bourgeoisie was the primary beneficiary" of the Civil Rights Movement.[14] At the same time, moderates of the old civil rights leadership as well as of the newly emerging Black Power movement, were integrating into the political establishment and forfeiting the struggle for social justice and economic equality.[15] Partly the consequence of civil rights gains, partly the conscious effort of the Nixon administration to pacify the growing radicalization of urban blacks, some concessions were granted and an exponential numbers of new black officials entered into elected office as Democrats.[16] Further, non-government organizations tied to the capitalist class extended control over moderate and liberal black organizations, including the Ford Foundation which was "deeply involved in financing and influencing almost all major [moderate] protest groups, including CORE, SCLC, the National Urban League, and the NAACP."[17]

According to the Panthers and the League, the black moderate middle-class leadership was too closely tied to the ruling elite and had grown accustomed to "run the black communities and keep them quiet" in exchange for "a piece of [the] action."[18] The harshest criticism was reserved towards the leaders who served as middlemen inside the black community. A 1967 article in the *Inner City Voice* charged:

> The American elite have manufactured a native elite; have picked out promising adolescents and filled their mouths with high-sounding phrases; who have been whitewashed; who have nothing left to say to their brother; who only echo "The Black Bourgeoisie," as Frazier calls them.[19]

And Kathleen Cleaver, who would run for California State Assembly as part of the Black Panther Party's alliance with the Peace and Freedom Party, further explained the thinking permeating the movement:

> One of the only ways that he (the imperialist) is able to win and maintain and control his power over the people he subjects and colonizes and exploits is to divide them and keep them fighting among themselves. The government has all types of programs to recruit and develop its forces within oppressed and exploited people, including the little devious means of black capitalism, poverty programs, scholarships or CIA training.[20]

In their articles, the Panthers exposed the lack of support from the middle-class to the militant black struggle, charging that "The black bourgeoisie, which black lawyers and professionals represent, has been singularly reluctant and unwilling to assist the development of our political party." The Panthers lamented: "When the assistance of black attorneys was most needed, they were silent."[21] K. Cleaver's writings, and many more that would appear in the Black Panther newspaper until about 1970, emphasized the class distinctions between the black bourgeoisie and the black masses. These statements were representative of a class break within the movement as a younger and radicalized generation of activists sought to expose the moderating influence of groups and politicians linked to the corporate elite, the government, and the Democratic Party

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[14] Allen, p. 26. For a more moderate viewpoint that expresses the same conclusion in regards to how affirmative action was institutionalized, see "Interview William Julius Wilson," *Frontline*, PBS, Spring 1997, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/race/interviews/wilson.html.

[15] Bloom, 116; Allen, 18.

[16] Bloom, 348; Robert Chrisman, "On Robert L. Allen's "Black Awakening in Capitalist America": "The Black Middle Class, 40 Years After," *The Black Scholar* 40, no. 2 (2010): 49-50.

[17] Allen, 73.

[18] Ibid., 19.

[19] Melvin Turner, "So-Called Riot Study," *Inner City Voice*, October 20, 1967.

[20] Kathleen Cleaver, "From New York Radio Address," *The Black Panther Saturday*, January 4, 1969.

[21] Kathleen Cleaver, "Black Lawyers are Jiving," *The Black Panther*, May 18, 1968

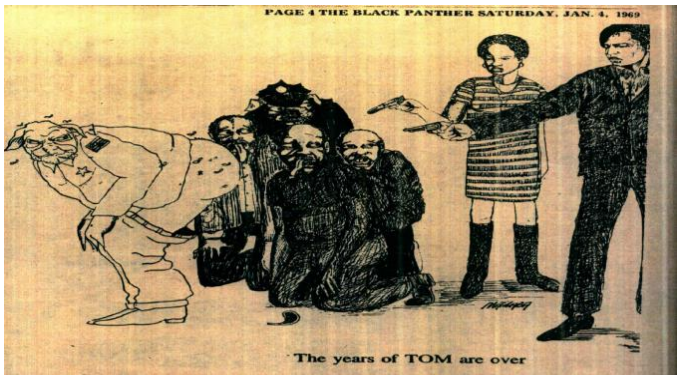


Figure 2. "The Years of TOM are Over," *The Black Panthers Saturday*, 4 January, 1969.

In response to the pressure of militant organizations and the mass movements, presidential-hopeful Richard Nixon utilized the black power slogan to promote black capitalism and minority businesses.[22] For Nixon, it was a question of integrating the black middle-class and quelling the threat of urban black rebellions.[23] For the League and the Panthers, this was an attempt by Nixon to "torpedo the black liberation struggle by buying off the black bourgeoisie...who are satisfied with crumbs from the master's table."[24] Huey wrote that, "as far as the masses are concerned," black capitalism "would be trading one master for another," and be a "cruel hoax." The black bourgeoisie were unable to play a revolutionary role because they found themselves in a contradictory position. On the one hand, they wanted to "eliminate racism in order to enhance their prospects," but on the other hand, "racism cannot be eliminated until capitalism is eliminated," and so the black bourgeoisie's interest in black liberation conflicted with their class interests.[25] It was this conclusion, that the middle-class could not lead the struggle for black liberation, that led the Black Panther Party and League of Revolutionary Black Workers towards the black urban proletariat and underclass.

Through practical experience with liberal and moderate civil rights organizations, radical black activists searched for a different social subject to lead a movement for liberation and socialism. After the experience of the massive black rebellions, especially Harlem in 1964, Watts in 1965, and Newark and Detroit in 1967, not to mention countless smaller ones during this period, growing numbers of activists began to consider that social forces that could potentially lead a revolution lay inside urban communities. The League of Revolutionary Black Workers believed that it was the black working class that formed the *vanguard*[26] of both the black liberation movement and the all-U.S. workers movement. The Black Panther Party argued that the working class was no longer a revolutionary class and that, in their place, the *lumpen* was destined to lead the struggle for black liberation, the possible link to the liberation of all communities from imperialism.

Black Workers "Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win"

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers saw in the black working class the social basis for organizing a revolutionary movement. Front-page headlines of the *Inner City Voice* were a sample of the concerns dominating the League and their focus on the black working class: "White Foreman Killed After

[22] Chrisman, 49-50; Dean Kotlowski, "Black Power-Nixon Style: The Nixon Administration and Minority Business Enterprise," *The Business History Review* 72 (1998): 409-455.
[23] On the urban rebellions, see Allen, 126; Bloom, 23-30; Geschwender, 83.
[24] Eldridge Cleaver, "Black Capitalism," *The Black Panther Saturday*, August 23, 1969.
[25] Newton, "The Black Panthers."
[26] Marxist, and more broadly a revolutionary Left, term for that social or political force that leads. May be used in a general-historical sense, as this paper does, or in a concrete way, for example, the Oakland protests against the killing of Oscar Grant in 2009 played a vanguard role in inspiring further protest against police brutality.

Racist Insult at Ford's," "Black Workers Uprising," "Fight U.A.W. Racism," an "Election Special" (dedicated to the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement slate for local union office) and "Reuther's Dead, Black Struggle Continues."

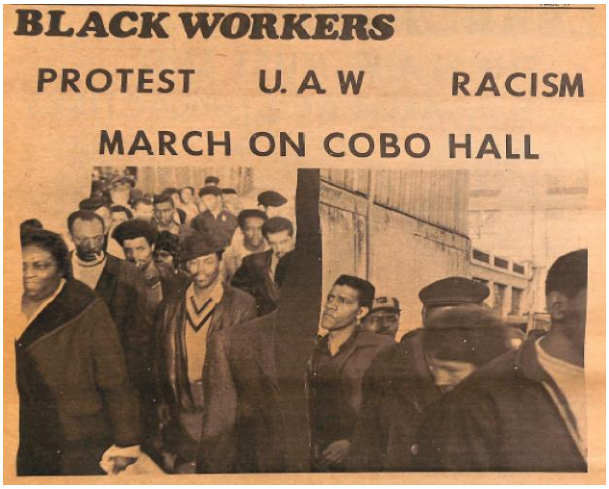


Figure 3. "Protest U.A.W. Racism March on Cobo Hall," *Inner City Voice*, November 1969.

The center of League activities focused on black auto workers in the Detroit area. League members were instrumental in forming the Revolutionary Union Movement (RUM) across auto plants in Detroit. The RUM was a black worker organization in the automobile industry. It sought to organize and mobilize black workers against racism from the automobile corporations as well as from the union. On the one hand, RUMs mobilized against the exploitation of the large auto companies and against the racist structure of the plants, where black workers filled the lowest-paying and dirtiest jobs without prospects of promotion. On the other hand, RUMs exposed and fought against the racist practices of the United Auto Workers leadership that had failed to effectively challenge racism in either the factory or the union.

The League led the RUMs in adopting a platform directed at the union to protest the lack of black worker representation in the U.A.W. and its failure to fight for black workers. Their demands included: 50 percent representation of black workers on the International Executive Committee, the firing of U.A.W. President Walter Reuther, the revision of the grievance procedure that shackled the right of workers to organize, elimination of safety and health hazards in the auto industry, for the five-hour work day, a four-day work week with no reduction in pay, a doubling of wages, and calls for the union to fight against speed-ups. In addition, the League raised demands specific to black workers and the black community, including an end to interference by the U.A.W. in the black community.[27]

While the League was primarily concerned with the self-organization and activity of black workers, their demands highlighted the intersection of interests between black and white workers. But the League maintained that due to white worker racism, separate factory-based and separate revolutionary groups were necessary.[28] The League had a theoretical basis for rooting the movement for black freedom and socialism in the working class and particularly the black working class.[29]

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[27] "Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement Convention," *Inner City Voice*, March 16-April 1, 1970; "Confront the Racist U.A.W. Leadership," *Inner City Voice*, November 1969.

[28] "General Policy," *Inner City Voice*, November-December 1970.

[29] While focus is given to the rise of anti-capitalist politics in connection to the immediate social and political environment, the influence of socialist and Marxist groups in the U.S., particularly on the League, and revolutions in the Third World were tremendous on both groups. See Geschwender, 80-81, 88; Bloom, 30-35, 66; also *Inner City Voice* and *The Black Panther* for coverage and imagery of Third World liberation movements.

> Black workers are the main producers in this society. It is the bare hands of black workers which turn raw materials into finished products. They exist as the most oppressed and exploited section of the proletariat and have the power to bring all of industry to a screeching halt.[30]

This clearly expresses the culmination of the League's theoretical analysis and political perspectives.

What distinguished the revolutionary potential of the black working class, according to the League, was their centrality to the production process in the U.S. and internationally and the logic of struggle against exploitation. Through the continuous confrontation of workers with capitalists, and the tendency of capitalism to lower wages in order to increase profits, workers were objectively led to higher orders of struggle up to a social revolution.[31] Kenneth V. Cockrel, a leader in the League, elaborated what the power of the working class was in a speech delivered to an anti-repression conference in Detroit:

> [The] League of Revolutionary Black is indeed involved in organizing black workers… [So] that racism, monopoly capitalism, and imperialism… [are] destroyed. And, we say that the point of greatest vulnerability of such a system is the point of production in the economic infrastructure of this system. So we say that it makes sense to organize workers inside of the plants to precipitate the maximum dislocation and the maximum paralysis of the operation of the capitalist, imperialist machine.[32]

The League viewed the poverty and hardships of the black ghetto as directly linked to the exploitation of workers. They believed that by organizing in the factories, they were organizing the most powerful and revolutionary social force under U.S. capitalism.

"Brothers on the Block"

Whereas the League theorized the black proletariat as the social subject of a revolutionary process, the Black Panther Party believed the *Lumpenproletariat* was the vanguard in the struggle for community liberation. While the League focused on factories as centers of organizing,[33] the Panthers focused on the streets, which "belong to the Lumpen."[34] E. Cleaver's article, "On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party," also issued as a separate pamphlet, offers perhaps the fullest and most succinct exposition of the Panthers' theory of the revolutionary role of the *Lumpenproletariat,* which he defined as:

> …all those who have no secure relationship or vested interest in the means of production and the institutions of capitalist society. That part of the "Industrial Reserve Army" held perpetually in reserve; who have never worked and never will; who can't find a job; who

[30] "Labor History Part II," *Inner City Voice*, February 1971. Geschwender also notes that 7 out of 8 employed blacks had proletarian occupations in 1970. James A. Geschwender, "Marxist-Leninist Organization-Prognosis Among Black Workers," *Journal of Black Studies* 8 (1978): 288.

[31] This perspective of falling wages has been borne out since the 1960s as real wages have fallen despite a tremendous rise in productivity. Lawrence Mishel, Elise Gould, and John Bivens, "Wage Stagnation in Nine Charts," January 6, 2015 (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute) http://www.epi.org/publication/charting-wage-stagnation/ (accessed February 28, 2016).

[32] Kenneth V. Cockrel, "From Repression to Revolution," *Inner City Voice*, April 15, 1970.

[33] That is not to say they didn't organize other sectors. They worked with students, domestic workers, and the community.

[34] Eldridge Cleaver, "On the Ideology of the Black Panther Party," (San Francisco, CA: The Freedom Archives) http://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/Black%20Liberation%20Disk/Black%20Power!/SugahData/Books/Cleaver.S.pdf (accessed February 5, 2016), 10.

> are unskilled and unfit; who have been displaced by machines, automation, and cybernation, and were never "retained or invested with new skills"; all those on Welfare or receiving State Aid.[35]

In addition, Cleaver adds the "Criminal Element," "Those who live by their wits, existing off that which they rip off, who stick guns in the faces of businessmen and say 'stick' em up,' or 'give it up'!"[36] The *lumpen* are those left out of the productive economic and social relations of capitalist society, existing at the bottom layers of the social order, with neither access or desire to work (though Cleaver's definition is slightly broader, including those on state aid who may very well be otherwise regularly employed).

In contemporary social literature, the *lumpen* are often referred to as the underclass victimized by capitalism. One cause for viewing the *Lumpenproletariat* as a revolutionary social force is that they constitute the most impoverished layers and often come from the most oppressed sectors in society. This understanding was crucial in the development of a black *Lumpenproletariat* ideology because, historically, black people in the United States suffered twice the unemployment rate of whites, occupied the worst job positions, and were "the last hired and first fired."[37]According to the Panthers, the degree of social and economic deprivation suffered by the black *lumpen* and its' lack of ties to the economic and social relations of the capitalist system, pushed the *lumpen* towards an anti-capitalist revolutionary politic. The participation of *lumpen* sectors along with workers in urban rebellions gave confidence to this position.

Black Panther Party leaders also theorized the potential of the *Lumpenproletariat* because they believed workers were no longer a revolutionary class. According to Cleaver, the working-class was revolutionary in its infancy, but had since been transformed into a "new industrial elite" that acted increasingly in the spirit of the "selfish craft and trade guilds" of the nineteenth century rather than as a liberating social force. All of the advances the working class achieved-- labor unions and contracts, social security and welfare-- all were concessions won from the capitalists and the State. And, according to Cleaver, these reforms worked to placate the working class and negate its revolutionary potential.[38] Cleaver criticized the labor movement and the labor officialdom for failing to wage a struggle against capitalism, charging that "The Labor Movement has abandoned all basic criticism of the Capitalist system of exploitation itself," labeling "the George Meanys, Walter Reuthers, and A. Phillip Randolphs …traitors to the proletariat as a whole." However, "they accurately reflect and embody the outlook and aspirations of the Working Class."[39]

There are parallels but also clear differences between the Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in their appraisal of trade union officialdom. The League did believe that the union bureaucracy represented the better-paid, white sector of workers. But the League also saw in the union bureaucracy a stifling force for worker militancy on the whole (the logic of DRUM's demands clearly show this) and for black workers in particular, and that this required a struggle against the union officialdom by the workers themselves. Cleaver, on the other hand, saw in the bureaucracy the true reflection of the workers' elevated position.

There is further reasoning for the Panther theory of organizing the *lumpen*. In a speech delivered at Boston College, Huey P. Newton argued that the process of technological change and automation was advancing so rapidly that the proletarian class was increasingly becoming superfluous and falling into the *Lumpenproletariat*, who would eventually constitute the majority in society. According to Huey, a

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[35] Ibid., 7.
[36] Ibid.
[37] The surge in criminalization and expansion of prisons since the late 1970s has added to the growth of a black underclass. Jeff Gou, "America has locked up so many black people it has warped our sense of reality," *Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/02/26/america-has-locked-up-so-many-black-people-it-has-warped-our-sense-of-reality/?wpisrc=nl_az_most (accessed February 26, 2016).
[38] Cleaver, "On Ideology," 8-9.
[39] Ibid, 8.

capitalist technocratic dictatorship with a majority composed of the unemployed was on the horizon.[40] This perspective-- automation leading to cybernation to a technocratic dictatorship with the masses unemployed and unemployable-- formed the last crucial theoretical reasoning in the Panthers' orientation to the *Lumpenproletariat*.

Cleaver concluded that "The contradiction between the *Lumpen* and the Working Class is very serious because it dictates a different strategy and set of tactics."[41] And so it was-- the League sought to organize the black working class while the Panthers organized the black *Lumpenproletariat*. The Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers had a very different assessment of the potential of workers and *lumpen* to lead a revolution.[42] It resulted in very important political and strategic differences. But what unified them was their proclivity to look towards the masses of black people, made up of workers, unemployed, and unemployables, and to see in them the potential of a revolutionary social force capable of transforming the very fabric of U.S. society.

"Victims of the Democratic Party"

One of the main obstacles to developing revolutionary consciousness among black people, according to the League and the Panthers, was allegiance to the Democratic Party. It was primarily through liberal black politicians and organizations that black people were convinced the Democratic Party represented them. Bayard Rustin, a leading figure in the Civil Rights Movement, argued that the Democratic Party was the party of "progress" and that blacks were "right to stay…[to build] a liberal-labor-civil rights coalition which would work to make the Democratic party truly responsive to the aspirations of the poor."[43] However, years of foot-dragging and experiences like John Lewis's censure at the March on Washington and the refusal to seat the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, had convinced many that the liberal party was, as Malcolm X famously put it, "a sly fox."[44] Building on a growing mood of dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party, the League and the Panthers proposed the movement break with them and form new revolutionary organizations representative of the grassroots.

A few years earlier, Malcolm X, generally regarded as "the ideological father of the black power movement," stated that "I am one of the 22 million victims of the Democrats."[45] At that time, he was one of the few leaders in the black freedom struggle willing to criticize the Democratic Party. By the latter half of the 1960s, a sampling of League and Panther statements show how far this conclusion came to permeate the thinking of the black radical movement. In a report-back from the Black People's Convention in Chicago, Judy Watts recounted (SNCC's) H. Rap Brown's statement that, "There can be no radical political reform for America as long as it is in the context of the Democratic Party."[46] At the same conference, James Foreman declared, "the biggest threat to the Democratic Party is national independent black political party formations."[47] Eldridge Cleaver, discussing the coalition of the Panthers with the Peace and Freedom Party, argued that "A lot of people in the Black community are not interested

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[40] Huey P. Newton, "Speech Delivered at Boston College, November 18, 1970," in *To Die For the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton,* ed. Toni Morrison (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2009), 20-39.
[41] Cleaver, "On Ideology," 9-10.
[42] A leader in the League, John Watson, describes the League's view as follows, "From our experience and our struggle, we could emphasize that the working class is the vanguard of the major force within the revolutionary struggle, and that the lumpen proletariat is in and of itself a class which generally splits." Quoted in Geschwender, 141-142.
[43] Bayard Rustin, "'Black Power' and Coalition Politics," *Commentary*, September 1996. https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/black-power-and-coalition-politics/ (accessed March 1, 2016).
[44] Allen, 24; Bloom, 24; Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 409.
[45] Allen, 30; Malcolm X, *American Nightmare* Speech. (Speech, Detroit, Michigan, April 12, 1964).
[46] Judy Watts, "Black Convention in Chicago," *Inner City Voice*, October 20, 1967.
[47] Ibid.

in electoral politics. Of those who are, many are opposed to the Democratic and the Republican Party, both of which have proven themselves to be open enemies of the Black people in their struggle for liberation."[48] An article in support of Kathleen Cleaver for the State Assembly declares, "The Black Panther Party has every intention of destroying the hold of the Democratic machine in the Black community."[49] And John Williams in *Inner City Voice* concluded that "any concept of black self-determination that assumes it can exist within a monopoly capitalist order is sheer foolishness...It's absurd to assume that blacks can vote themselves to freedom and coexist with the system."[50] In these statements and writings, the Panthers and the League are unequivocal in the necessity to build independent political organizations and to "destroy" the influence of the Democratic Party. In the context of strict black support to the Democratic Party, to destroy the influence of the Democrats was to destroy the influence of the entire government and ruling apparatus over the black community.

Tensions Brewing: A National or Class Front?

The debate over uniting with black middle-class organizations and politicians threatened to derail black political independence. Debate raged within the movement over whether the revolution was national or socialist in character, and if it was both, how to combine them. The discussion largely revolved around whether to unite the entire black people in a struggle for nationhood or to organize the subaltern black classes in an alliance with other exploited sectors among non-whites and whites. Both the Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers saw themselves as fighting for national liberation and socialism, and that without socialism there could be no self-determination for black people.[51] The debate over a black united front and the role of elected black officials is evidence of the rich ideological struggle inside the Black Liberation movement, as they left liberalism behind and searched for a program of freedom and socialism.

Articles in the early issues of the *Inner City Voice* called for a "common front" of all black organizations in spite of ideological and class differences.[52] "To Reason Why" argued that skin color was the basis of unity and that even "the black conservative has no choice."[53] Stokely Carmichael, in an interview reprinted in *Inner City Voice,* called for a united front of all organizations who "struggle for the demands of the black race."[54] In its practical activities, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers helped to found the Black Economic Development Conference to raise funds for their group. It brought together black businesses, clergy, civil rights organizations, and militant activists.[55] While occasional voices for a black united front were heard in the pages of *Inner City Voice,* the League as a whole remained outside of such black united fronts.

The idea of a black united front was very popular among black nationalists at this time but others saw it as a betrayal of class independence that threatened to co-opt the movement because more often than not, such organizations fell under the direction of moderate middle-class sectors.[56] The Black Panther Party, as well as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, were distinguished from strictly nationalist or cultural-nationalist political organizations in that they leaned towards uniting with radical

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[48] "Black Panthers Support Peace and Freedom Party," *Inner City Voice*, January 22, 1967.
[49] "Kathleen Cleaver for Assemblywoman," *The Black Panther*, May 18, 1968.
[50] John Williams, "Black Perspectives…The Cleveland and Gary Elections," *Inner City Voice*, December 15, 1967.
[51] "General Policy," *Inner City Voice*, November-December 1970; Newton, "The Black Panthers," *The Black Panther*, August 23, 1969.
[52] This was before the formation of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, when the format of the paper was a broad forum for left-leaning black activists. The same activists who founded *Inner City Voice* in September 1967 founded the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in early 1969.
[53] "To Reason Why," Inner City Voice, November 16, 1967.
[54] Originally given in Havana to the Mexican newspaper SUCESOS, reproduced as "Stokely Tells What Its All About," *Inner City Voice*, December 15, 1967.
[55] Geschwender, 143-145.
[56] Allen, 135-143, 250.Ibid.

sectors of other workers (white and non-white) and mass movements. They also opposed calls for a united front of all black organizations without distinction or criteria. The Panthers in particular are known to have conducted a broad alliance with other Left forces, including various non-black anti-imperialists groups like the anti-war movement and the Peace and Freedom Party; they also called to support burgeoning gay liberation struggles.[57]

While the main thrust of the League from 1968 until 1971 opposed the strategy of building a black united front or of aligning with the Democratic Party, there were voices hinting otherwise. The League attempted to organize the Black Workers Congress, a workers-based united front with other workers from among third-world people.[58] Still, one article in the ICV discussed the possibility of a black Democrat becoming the first mayor of a large American city, arguing that, "Hatcher is far from being a revolutionary, but he will be a revolution in Gary."[59] Although a reprint from another Left journal and thus not necessarily reflective of a dominant attitude in the League, it is symptomatic of tendencies that existed within the black liberation movement. Another article, highly critical of the Democratic Party, asked provocatively, "are all these Black officials any better than our white oppressors? Are they too deceivers, hungry for money lovers of capitalism, defenders of United States' imperialism, unconcerned about the miserable condition of poor people around the world, and especially poor Black working class people in the United States?" [60]Answering the question, the article found that "it is evident that most Black officials are apologists for and supporters of capitalism and imperialism." Having declared black Democratic Party officials unfit as representatives of exploited and oppressed black people, the author points to the need to "organize ourselves into revolutionary organizations that seek to smash racism, capitalism and imperialism and all their flunkies, Black or white."[61] Yet, the very next line suggests that "perhaps Black elected officials can be used in the struggle for revolution and liberation" if only they were to change their political positions.[62] These statements are taken as evidence of the debates and unfinished programmatic tasks of the movement.

From Black Liberation and Intercommunalism to Community Empowerment

The 1970s marked a decisive turn for the Black Panther Party away from both revolutionary self-determination and socialism and towards electoral politics and the Democratic Party. The crisis of program was resolved in the direction of liberalism. The Panthers began a process to "deepen relationships with black elected politicians," closed their locals branches across the country, and centralized the entire organization in Oakland for electoral purposes. Elaine Brown, appointed by Newton to lead the Panthers in his absence, explained the Panthers' new strategy of "liberating the territory of Oakland… [by] voting in the city of Oakland." While Panthers Elaine Brown and Bobby Seale ran for office, their main achievements were electing Democrat Jerry Brown governor of California, cementing ties with progressive black Congressman Ron Dellums' Oakland Democratic Party machine, and electing Democrat Lionel Wilson the first black Mayor of Oakland.[63] As Bloom concludes, "The source of the Party's power under [Brown's] leadership was conventional political savvy coupled with community service."[64]

In 1972, the Black Panther Party gave an introduction to a reprinted reform program presented by the Black Congressional Caucus that was a mixture of welfare demands with calls for greater

[57] Bloom, 288-308.
[58] Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 160.
[59] "Black Candidate in Indiana Race*," Inner City Voice*, November 16, 1967.
[60] "Election Special," *Inner City Voice*, November-December 1970.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Bloom, 380-385; Aaron Dixon, "Vanguard of the Revolution- A Good Film But Not Good Enough," *Counterpunch*, October 16, 2015. http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/10/16/a-good-film-but-not-good-enough/ (accessed December 05, 2015).
[64] Bloom, 385.

accountability by the Nixon Administration. It was heralded not as a limited reform or "crumbs from the master's table," but almost as a revolution. Moreover, the Democrats, no longer "open enemies of the people," became champions of the exploited and oppressed. "Within this proposal lies a concrete program, presented by Black representatives, in the true interests of Black and oppressed people. Its contents...indicate that the members of the Black Congressional Caucus"- the editor goes on to list all 13 members- "intend to serve the people, body and soul."[65]

The dramatic shift in the case of the Panthers, was a consequence of the failure to develop a dependable program for political change that combined self-determination and socialism. The League and the Panthers struggled to define their relationship to the black middle class and black Democratic Party officials; the League remained independent of the Democratic Party. However, broader differences over the role of the black liberation struggle in the context of a U.S. and global struggle against imperialism led to a split that precipitated the collapse of the League. The Black Panther Party succumbed to pressures and contradictions in their theory, ending their class and political independence as they faded out of existence.

Conclusion

The Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers were representative of the developing political and ideological awareness in the black movement following the Civil Rights insurgency. Their anti-capitalism was an organic political conclusion, which stemmed from the limitations of civil rights gains to deliver social and economic equality. Their organizations were rooted in urban rebellions and black struggles in the workplace. They connected to the experiences, social needs, and political interests of the black subaltern classes and sought to establish a movement independent of middle class and Democratic Party liberalism.

Their theories and ideologies were not just rhetoric. Revolutionary ideology in the black movement was connected to a national and often global analysis and at the same time it expressed the pressing needs of the most exploited and oppressed sections in society. Theory and ideology in revolutionary movements demands serious treatment in scholarship. The theories that guided the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the Black Panther Party did not simply play out in protest chants, but in the very strategies they pursued. At the same time, the League and Panthers did not fully develop or reach agreement on their political program. The stability and cohesion of revolutionary organizations is based mainly on common principles agreed upon by leaders and members alike, without which, no revolutionary organization can survive.

Theory was not an intellectual exercise for these revolutionaries but a guide to action. They searched for historical and theoretical reasons to justify their positions. Perhaps most significant in the context of continued two-party political hegemony, they located the forces of social change in the subaltern classes and advocated independent political action.[66] Their goals of building a new society along cooperative lines, combining self-determination and socialism, may inspire today's generation who search for an end to, in Malcolm X's words, the "American Nightmare" that Ferguson and St. Louis have recently come to connote. Alongside their visionary ideas of building a new world, the Black Panther Party and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers should be remembered for embodying the slogan that animated the issues of *Inner City Voice*, for they "dared to struggle, dared to win."

[65] "A Survival Program in Congress? Black Congressional Congress Calls for Re-distribution of U.S. Wealth," in *The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service*, ed. David Hilliard (New York: Atria Books, 2007), 109-111.
[66] Contrast to Bernie Sanders' call for a "political revolution" as part of the Democratic Party.