

# White Radicals and Black Revolt

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DISCUSSIONS by radicals and antiwar liberals concerning political perspectives must begin with an estimate of the black revolt this summer or risk irrelevance. If there were still illusions about the chances of forging a liberal-radical electoral coalition around the slogan of "peace and civil rights," the flames of Detroit, Newark and a score of other cities should have dispelled them. In truth, many ghetto residents said openly that they were disgusted with the war both because black people were fighting a white man's war in southeast Asia and because the war was robbing the people of needed schools, jobs and homes. But black people were also showing that they recognized that the real enemies of their communities included not only political figures but also the downtown commercial establishment and the large industrial corporations. Meanwhile, the presidential candidate of the moderate antiwar movement, Martin Luther King, spoke in favor of sending federal troops into Detroit to put out the fires.

The strategy of nonviolence as a road to freedom and power for black people went up in the same smoke as the business districts and the ghettos. Fed up with the top-level negotiations between "civil rights" leaders and government officials which only produce pious phrases and solemn pledges to do "more," significant numbers of adults as well as young people in the ghetto are searching desperately for an alternative. It is fairly clear now that a simultaneous movement of Negroes in many cities would leave the enormous political and military machine of the power structure without sufficient resources to handle the situation.

On the one hand, the specific source of the discontent—the powerlessness of the people to control their own communities in order really to share in the fat American pie—is not soluble on a broad scale within the present context. It is possible to pour millions into a single ghetto such as Watts in order to buttress social-welfare services and produce a few jobs, but it is not possible to find the billions necessary to allay the discontent of millions of Negroes living in scores of communities. A massive effort to end the economic oppression of the black people of our country would really involve a fundamental alteration in our national pri-

orities. It would threaten the profits of large corporations. It would challenge the war economy. It would question the whole, white, corporate-power structure, which is responsible for making the decisions.

## Two Americas

On the other hand, the demand for local control is itself impermissible as long as the war machine requires black men to do the dirty work of American neocolonialism abroad and remain the underclass of American society at home. Real local control would mean that there could be two Americas: a white America controlled by the corporations and a black America whose economic, political and social life would be determined from within. That is why the black-power conference in July raised the issue of the two-nations concept.

There is no doubt that there will be major attempts to find social as well as military solutions to the growing unrest. The main thrust of administration and liberal response to the events this summer is to strengthen the police forces. We can expect the tightening of the net of oppression in black communities coupled with some innovations in the social-welfare field.

One of the most talked-about new features of the anti-poverty crusade is the attempt to draw private industry into the field. Led by Senator Kennedy, advocates of a government-business partnership to provide jobs want to revamp the program in order to make poverty-fighting attractive to businessmen. They want to involve private builders in the construction of low-rent housing and community facilities by providing profit guarantees and other incentives. They want to relieve the government of total responsibility for the antipoverty program because there is not enough money in the public sector to maintain the war machine and expand social benefits at the same time. Simultaneously, they want to restore the "confidence" of ghetto residents in the corporate sector of the economy. It seems inconceivable that enough resources can be found to buy off large sections of the Negro masses, which have rejected the old programs or the old ways of dealing with the black community—negotiating with the elite.

Who does speak for the ghetto now that King and the civil-rights establishment have revealed their impotence? It is significant that none of the major national leaders except those of S.N.C.C. and CORE are to be found where the action is. Can the middle-class Negro remain the articulate voice of the oppressed black man? It is probable that most of the activity this summer is as spontaneous or independent of organized *traditional* groupings as was the revolt of 1964. Despite talk of urban guerrilla warfare, not even the most articulate black-power advocates seem to have anything more than a set of slogans. It is apparent that none of the existing groups really has power to change the structure of the ghetto.

### A Revolutionary Stance

Yet it is noteworthy that many black radicals have adopted a revolutionary stance as opposed to the liberal, integrationist position which was still ascendant three years ago. Thus far, there is no indication that these radicals have a real base among black workers or poor people. They are also weak on program. Despite an emotional affinity for the Cuban revolution, or vague sympathies for Mao, the new black-power advocates are not Communists. They are revolutionary nationalists with no immediate or transitional program to bridge the present and the future. There seems to be a simple insurrectionalist strategy among large sections of the movement, which romantically hold the view that the spontaneous action of the masses is sufficient to bring revolutionary change. While this doctrine is not sharply articulated, it has widespread support. Many of the new revolutionaries disdain an immediate program because they identify this approach with liberalism. An immediate program means negotiations with liberalism. It smacks of the collective-bargaining posture common to traditional civil-rights leadership. When the riots were raging, none of the new leaders stepped forward to represent the movement. They said there was no need for leadership to tell "whitey" what to do for the ghetto—"whitey" knows what needs to be done.

Black power has a long road ahead. Although it has, as a concept, captured the imagination of large numbers of young people of both races, it still awaits a strategy, a program and a leadership.

Where does this prospect leave those who have been acting as if a genuine alternative to the Johnson Administration and the military-industrial power structure underlying it might be found in a relatively modest program whose cutting edge was general opposition to the Vietnam war?

The overwhelming majority of liberals support the President in his call for "law and order," established by force if necessary. They, too, are threatened by the radical character of the riots. They want to see our country reformed to provide adequate income for the poor, decent housing and schools and many other social benefits which they believe should accrue to all citizens in an affluent society. But black radicals say that the power relations must change in order for this to take

place, that social welfare without community power does not change the oppressive conditions of American life.

Liberals want to find a way to negotiate America out of the war in Vietnam (without surrendering to the Vietnamese people) and out of racial "chaos" at home without surrendering white corporate power. The radical answer to liberalism is that it can't be done. American intervention abroad has solid economic and political roots in the corporate capitalist system and so does black oppression at home. Up to now, this perspective seemed abstract. The black revolt has made it concrete.

White radicals have to decide whether they will stand with the corporate and middle-class liberals or whether they will act in a parallel way to the black-power movement. The summer's events have forced us to make this decision.

### Link with Black Power

The basic question for 1968 and the next ten years is: how do we organize around a radical program capable of linking with the emergent black-power movement?

We are not relevant right now to the black movement except insofar as we demand that the government keep its hands off the ghetto. If we find a constituency beyond the student movement for a program based on the transfer of power from the corporations to the people, then the basis for some kind of alliance exists.

We are not bound by the formulas of the Old Left which identify the agents of social change narrowly as the industrial working-class, but we need not debunk the idea that the working class is the real bearer of social transformation. The new radicalism has been built among students and their adult counterparts: the intellectuals, technicians and administrative workers. This group is a force in American society because of its growing numbers as well as its strategic importance for the maintenance of social stability through the educational system and functional bureaucracies of government.

### The New Working Class

The so-called "new working class" of intellectuals and technicians has formed the heart of the antiwar movement, the white civil-rights movement and other left-oriented civic activity. Members of this class are also engaged in forming unions among teachers, welfare workers and other white-collar groups.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom of the fifties, many within these groups are found on the American Left in America because they perceive that affluence is not enough. A society that can make them excellent consumers but that deprives them of personal and social autonomy is not healthy. Middle-class people are antiwar less because of the horrors entailed in mass destruction than because of the understanding that the power to make and promulgate war is out of their hands—that the democratic-pluralist myth is in conflict with the corporate-controlled, centralized reality. Edu-

cated people are becoming radicalized because they doubt the credibility of American leadership and the legitimacy of its liberal claims.

Even if it were possible to organize this constituency last year without confronting the new politics of the black movement, it cannot be done now. Radicals have the hard job of saying "yes" to the revolutionary politics of the black movement, "yes" to the revolutionary movements abroad—and "no" to liberalism.

This does not seem easy during a period of white hysteria. Nor does it help win widespread support among those who have been vaguely leaning towards the Left. But the most dangerous political problem facing the Left is the chance that its most advanced sector, the black movement, will be isolated and then crushed by federal and state repression. If this occurs, the chief catalyst of the movement will be silenced and the white Left itself robbed of its own vitality.

### **Prelude to Attack**

Even more significantly, the repression of the black revolutionaries would be a prelude to a broader attack upon the whole antiwar movement, militant trade union activists and radical intellectuals. The technique currently employed by the administration is to raise the slogans of "riot control" and "law and order" in order to prepare the ground for incorporation of pacifists and left liberals, who either abhor violence on principle or—in the case of the latter—have faith in democratic methods within American capitalism for solving social problems.

Thus far, hardly any prominent members of white Left groups have publicly announced their support of Rap Brown and the Revolutionary Action Movement. The only expression of solidarity has been supplied by the liberal civil libertarians, whose defense of black power advocates rounded up in the latest rebellions has been conducted on the free-speech and due-process issues rather than the substance of the black radicals' critique of the social system. (On the other hand, recent statements by Brown and others show a growing trend to socialist politics, even if the inspiration has come from the revolutionary movements in the neocolonial countries.)

### **Insurrection**

During the Communist trials in the late forties and early fifties, when mere adherence to the general ideology of Marxism-Leninism afforded a sufficient excuse for official terror, the actions of the Communist Party were in keeping with a mild, legal opposition to the Cold War. In contrast, the current position of black radicals corresponds to actual insurrectionary conditions. The difference is fundamental in the eyes of the law, if the famous dictum of Oliver Wendell Holmes that the subversive character of mere statements have to be judged in their context is any guide.

Today the black radicals are potentially more dangerous to established corporate authority than the Communists were twenty years ago. Black power in its many forms

has roots in important sections of the black community. Although that wing of the black-power movement which has armed revolutionary aims may, in the end, be incarcerated, isolated and broken, the specter has been raised of the specific revolutionary content of the idea of "social change."

For white radicals, the defense of black revolutionaries is necessary to their own salvation. The black movement has succeeded in making the question of revolution relevant to American life.

### **Armed Self-Defense**

One key issue is the permissibility of armed self-defense under the repressive conditions of ghetto life. The target of the new gun laws advocated by liberals and conservatives alike is clearly no longer related to the Kennedy assassination. Its object is the disarming of black revolutionaries and others in the ghetto. The "gun roundup" carried out in Plainfield, New Jersey several weeks ago was an interesting indication of the importance attached by state officials to the fact that Negroes had arms.

Another crucial question is whether the Movement is ready to go on the offensive in the fight to preserve its right to advocate revolutionary transformation of American society and, in fact, to use such a campaign to explicate on its ideas. Recent events force us to say where we stand and explain our position to many people to whom the concept of socialist revolution is either abstract or meaningless.

### **A Collapsed Ideology**

I am convinced that the left-liberal ideology of general opposition to the war coupled with a commitment to radical peaceful reform at home no longer serves the Left. It collapsed under the weight of the armed intervention of the government in the ghetto.

Further, it should be plain that pressure is not enough to stay Johnson's hand in Vietnam. As the squeeze on workers and poor people becomes more powerful, as a result of the tax increase and new troop commitments to southeast Asia, the attempts of the antiwar movement to reconcile its liberal and left wings around a minimum program seem less relevant than ever before.

The next step for white radicals is resistance, political defense of black power and revolutionary socialist education. The left can unite with liberals on specific demonstrations or projects, but it can no longer take a back seat to the prominent liberals seeking to accommodate the movement to the "dove" sectors of the Establishment political parties. What is needed now is the building of a white revolutionary socialist movement based on an understanding of the carrot-and-stick thrust of the corporate power structure. Whether the threat of eruptions from the ghetto brings a reign of terror on both black people and white liberals and radicals is not entirely within our control. What is evident, however, is that the need was never greater for a serious white revolutionary counterpart to the developing black movement.