

The Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Liberation and Democratic Equality

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The MUG editors asked if I would like to write an article on the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement. I said I would, but that it would have to be about the black freedom struggle in general because I do not think the conventional division between a moderate Civil Rights Movement and a radical Black Power Movement gives due recognition to the deeply radical character of Martin Luther King, Jr's political thought, which transcended the boundaries of this division.

King gave a comprehensive account of his political beliefs and how he came to hold them in his 1958 book, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*. Like the later Black Power Movement, King placed the black struggle for equality in the broader history of the worldwide struggle against colonialism and imperialism. He was also just as vehement in his condemnation of economic injustice and the violence of the Klan, police, court, and prison system. And he was not afraid to cite Marx against the evils of capitalism at a time when the FBI and the House Un-American Activities Committee were still on the hunt for communist sympathizers. But he would later differ with Black Power advocates on such issues as the role of violence vs. nonviolence; American vs. African or Third World identity; whether black Americans were a colony; and on democratic egalitarianism in a multiracial society vs. some form of independent black community/nation.

Although King was involved in debates with Robert Williams and Malcolm X between 1959 and 1965 over the role of violence and the ideologies of black nationalism and separatism, these debates were cut short when Williams went into exile in 1961 and Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965. However, Williams and Malcolm X directly influenced both Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) and Huey Newton. Carmichael gave a name to this movement in his Black Power speech on the March Against Fear in Mississippi in June 1966, and Newton and Bobby Seale followed in October with the founding of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. From these beginnings, the Black Power Movement would explode in size and influence in 1967.

1967

In May, armed Black Panthers made headlines when they entered the California State Capitol to protest a gun control bill aimed at them. In July, Newark and Detroit erupted in rebellion, triggered by police abuses. And Stokely Carmichael and Richard V. Hamilton's *Black Power* was

published that fall, warning of urban guerrilla warfare if blacks were prevented from exercising control over their own lives. Carmichael recognized blacks made up only ten percent of the US population, but he likened the situation in the US to a colonial people fighting for liberation. King disagreed profoundly with Carmichael's characterization of blacks as a colony within the US and answered Carmichael in his last book, *Where Do We Go From Here?*:

Who are we? We are the descendants of slaves. We are the offspring of noble men and women who were kidnapped from their native land and chained in ships like beasts. We are the heirs of a great and exploited continent known as Africa. We are the heirs of a past of rope, fire and murder. I for one am not ashamed of this past. My shame is for those who became so inhuman that they could inflict this torture upon us. (p. 53)

But we are also Americans. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America. In spite of the psychological appeals of identification with Africa, the Negro must face the fact that America is now his home, a home he helped build through 'blood, sweat and tears.' Since we are Americans the solution to our problem will not come through seeking to build a separate black nation within a nation, but by finding that creative minority of the concerned from within the oftentimes apathetic majority, and together moving toward that colorless power that we all need for security and justice. (p. 54)

America must be a nation in which its multi-racial people are partners in power. This is the essence of democracy toward which all Negro struggles have been directed since the distant past when he was transplanted here in chains. (p. 54)

Beneath all the satisfaction of a gratifying slogan, Black Power is a nihilistic philosophy born out of the conviction that the Negro can't win. It is, at bottom, the view that American society is so hopelessly corrupt and enmeshed in evil that there is no possibility of salvation from within. Although this thinking is understandable as a response to a white power structure that never completely committed itself to true equality for the Negro, and a die-hard mentality that sought to shut all windows and doors against the winds of change, it nonetheless carries the seeds of its own doom. (p. 44)

King was for integration, but not on the terms of other Civil Rights leaders attached to the Democratic Party, which he broke with in his April condemnation of the Vietnam War.

1968

Everyone knows what happened in 1968: the Tet offensive; MLK's assassination; cities burning; the Columbia University occupation and strike; RFK's assassination; multiple gun battles between police and Black Panthers; the police riot at the Chicago Democratic National Convention.

I have one more event to add to this list. After the Democratic Convention, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) issued a fifty thousand copy special edition of *New Left Notes* calling for a national student strike and demonstrations across the country on Election Day. Turnout was small and disappointing everywhere, but our demonstration in Newark with the Black Panthers was important for other reasons.

An SDS community organizing project led by Tom Hayden had been working in Newark since 1964. It was part of a larger SDS effort to build an interracial movement of the poor in Northern cities, an idea suggested to Hayden by Stokely Carmichael in 1963. However, by 1968 the original aim of the project to create a political movement of the poor had been overwhelmed by the escalation in Vietnam and the rebellion in 1967, in which twenty-six died; but a small group of SDS activists remained and maintained a working relationship with the Panthers. That is why the Election Day demonstration in Newark was a joint Panther/SDS project.

The demonstration at a downtown park drew only a few hundred people, half being students bused in from campuses and half Black Panthers from Newark. After a few speeches, the students and Panthers went their separate ways. I'll quote from the next day's Princeton student newspaper for an account of what happened next:

Newark policemen beat orderly SDS demonstrators

By Richard Balfour NEWARK — A peaceful demonstration by the Students for a Democratic Society against yesterday's election became a violent melee when police, apparently acting without provocation, attacked and beat several protesters. The police acted when members of the right-wing Young Americans for Freedom began shoving stragglers at the end of the column of protesters which was moving away from the scene of its rally in order to disband. The police, wading into the crowd of about 20 radicals, attempted to push them faster than their orderly pace and then began beating them with black-jacks and nightsticks. No Young Americans for Freedom were attacked. James J. Tarlau '70 was one of the two protesters injured in the clash. He was treated for several scalp lacerations and body blows at the Newark City Hospital and released.

The reality was worse. Tarlau was our SDS chapter president, and the leader of the Newark Police Red Squad identified him by name before clubbing him. And the right-wing Young Americans for Freedom were part of a larger vigilante movement led by Anthony Imperiale that began armed patrols of black neighborhoods during the 1967 uprising.

My takeaway from these events, and the general conclusion within SDS by the end of 1968, was that the Panthers were a tiny, vulnerable group that a handful of students had little power to protect, and that we would have to expand our activities beyond the campuses if we wanted to build a more powerful movement.

1969

The establishment of the Fort Dix GI coffeehouse in April, which included a number of people from Newark SDS, and the Revolutionary Union's publication of *The Red Papers* at the same time were the two most significant expressions of SDS's move beyond the campuses. The coffeehouse group was soon involved in a campaign to Free the Fort Dix 38, which became a rallying point in the fall for a coalition including the Panthers, Young Lords, Young Patriots, American Servicemen's Union, and other antiwar groups. (The Fort Dix 38 were GIs, including members of the antiwar American Servicemen's Union, who had been charged with crimes allegedly committed during a riot in the base prison in June.) *The Red Papers*, widely distributed at the last SDS convention, would sell 20,000 copies over the next year and set the terms of debate within the New Communist Movement for the next five years. Its immediate suggestion was that students should form collectives, move to working class communities, get industrial jobs, and study Marxism-Leninism.

There were changes going on within the black liberation movement at the same time. The League of Revolutionary Black Workers formed in Detroit and advocated a strategy based on factory workers rather than the Panthers' strategy of organizing the lumpen. (See John Watson's 1969 interview.) Then the Panthers held their United Front Against Fascism Conference in July, which was a disappointment because their main strategic proposal for community control of police was too narrow and shared too much in common with the reformist politics of the Communist Party leaders who had prominent roles at the conference. Finally and sadly, Fred Hampton was assassinated and his leadership in pulling together a multi-racial Rainbow Coalition was lost.

1970

The May Day Rally in New Haven in support of Bobby Seale, Erika Huggins, and other Black Panthers on trial for murder coincided with the US invasion of Cambodia. In addition to

triggering a national student strike that closed down hundreds of colleges, these events also convinced several thousand student radicals that the crisis of US imperialism was intensifying and the RU was right about the necessity of creating a new revolutionary multi-racial communist party. That's when I moved to Oakland and joined the RU.

1971

Similar to Tom Hayden following the advice of Stokely Carmichael to go organize in Northern cities, Bob Avakian was following the personal advice of the Panthers to go organize poor whites when he moved to Richmond in late 1967. At first, some RU members experimented with wearing Mao pins to work, selling the Black Panther newspaper, and calling openly for communism. Although these initial efforts generated a lot of debate and a few fights, they turned out to be poor organizing tactics. It also became obvious there was no way to organize white workers separately from black workers, so by 1969 the RU had concluded it would be necessary to form a multi-racial communist party. However, the specific relation of the black liberation struggle and black workers to such a party and the less politically advanced white working class (including its outright racist parts) remained an open question.

I began to develop my own views on these issues as a result of writing an article on George Jackson's killing at San Quentin on 8/21/1971 (the Attica Prison uprising followed on 9/9). The editor of the RU newspaper suggested I read Lenin's "The Drafting of 183 Students Into the Army" to get an idea of how socialists and workers should respond to instances of non-working class oppression. The article contained the line, "The worker who can look on indifferently while the government sends troops against the student youth is unworthy of the name of socialist." That led me to read more to find out what Lenin's conception of real socialism was, and that eventually led to Chapter III, Section E of *What Is to Be Done? (WITBD)*, "The Working Class as Vanguard Fighter for Democracy," and "Political Agitation and 'The Class Point of View'", which together defined the primary immediate political tasks of socialists as opposition to oppression of every kind and the establishment of a democratic republic. (To forestall a common objection, Lenin believed the goal of a democratic republic was the same for every country, be it a backward majority peasant autocracy like Russia or an advanced capitalist constitutional republic like France.)

From the perspective of Lenin's unified democratic ideology, important parts of the RU's statement of political principles and strategy now seemed questionable and confused. Most obviously, the RU considered its primary strategic goal to be socialism, not democracy; yet

within this socialist strategy it wasn't clear whether the RU thought the black struggle and Mexican-American struggle should be characterized as a struggle for democratic equality or whether black and brown workers were the vanguard of an emerging multi-racial socialist struggle. Also, despite its claim that socialist revolution was its primary strategic goal, the RU did not think the formation of a new communist party was the movement's primary task or that socialism should be its immediate message to workers. Instead, it came up with the formulation that the central task of the movement was "building the struggle, consciousness and revolutionary unity of the working class and developing its leadership in the anti-imperialist struggle." Many people outside the RU wondered how revolutionary leadership could be developed without openly advocating for socialism and a party. It seemed the RU was still spooked by its earlier experiments with Mao pins and Little Red Books.

1972

None of these unresolved ambiguities mattered much in 1972. Several thousand former students had by then moved into working class organizing and there was a sense the movement was reaching a critical mass. The RU itself was publishing monthly newspapers in about fifteen cities and was strong enough to play a major role in the nationwide boycott of the Farah clothing company in support of four thousand mainly Mexican-American women on strike for a union in El Paso. Seeing what the RU had accomplished and agreeing with its formulation of the movement's main task, the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization (PRRWO), the Black Workers Congress (BWC), and I Wor Kuen (IWK) announced in July they were joining a National Liaison Committee (NLC) with the RU to coordinate activities and discuss ideological issues. Then the *Guardian* (New York) newspaper, after becoming aware of the growth of this movement, announced in its October twenty-fifth anniversary issue it had converted to Marxism-Leninism and was committed to the creation of a new revolutionary party. That was just about the high point of the New Communist Movement.

US and Chinese foreign policy was one area that would soon confound revolutionary expectations. The New Communist Movement's conception of imperialism was based on Lin Biao's analysis in *Long Live the Victory of People's War!*, which predicted, in the RU's words, that the "reciprocating domestic and international conflict against US imperialism, mounting in intensity and overcoming difficulties and setbacks, will continue for a relatively long period, but its end result is certain—the destruction of US imperialism." The continuing US withdrawal from Vietnam and Mao's meeting with Nixon indicated this reciprocating intensification was diminishing. Third World liberation struggles were supposed to keep intensifying, and the Chinese

had accused Nixon of being a new Hitler, but the withdrawal of the US from Vietnam and recognition of China went against these expectations.

From another direction, the Communist League (CL) published a comprehensive critique in September of the RU's hesitancy to put Marxist-Leninist propaganda and party-building at the center of its political work. Led by Nelson Peery, a black former Communist Party member who remained loyal to Stalin, CL relied on Lenin's arguments in *WITBD* to accuse the RU of failing to give conscious revolutionary leadership to mass movements. CL had a better understanding of Lenin's emphasis on consciousness and leadership than the RU, but by consciousness and leadership CL meant the standard Marxist-Leninist theory of a centralized communist party contained in Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism*. I also thought the RU was neglecting Lenin's theory of political consciousness and leadership, but I meant by political consciousness and leadership Lenin's theory of democratic egalitarianism.

CL also insisted that a Negro Nation existed in the South and support for its independence from the Anglo nation in the North was central to the success of proletarian revolution in all of North America. This position was at odds with the RU's judgment that even if a Negro nation had existed in the South in the past, the Great Migration to the North and the mechanization of Southern agriculture had dispersed blacks across the country and concentrated them in working class jobs in cities. Instead of leaders of a movement for an independent nation, the RU saw black and brown workers as the most politically advanced within a larger nation-wide multi-racial working class movement.

1973

Although much smaller than the RU, and smaller still than the RU, BWC, and PRRWO combined (IWK had left the NLC), CL did have some success drawing together a core of black and brown workers, most importantly some of the autoworker founders of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit. By the fall, RU leaders were panicking at these developments and (without informing the RU membership) proposed to the BWC and PRRWO that "flying squads" should be formed immediately and sent around the country to pull together a new revolutionary communist party before CL could declare one. The BWC and PRRWO thought this proposal was nuts, in part because they would be a minority in a centralist majority-white ex-student organization, but also because the formation of a party had not yet been raised in mass work due to common agreement it wasn't the movement's primary task. It didn't help that the RU's main representative on the NLC was a black FBI informant sowing mistrust, but the political incompetence and erratic behavior were the RU's own doing. The RU

then poisoned the atmosphere even more by accusing the BWC and PRRWO of being bourgeois nationalists for rejecting the RU's party proposal.

1974

The BWC and PRRWO reaction to the RU's party proposal focused on two questions: the meaning of self-determination and the primary task of the movement. Regarding the right of self-determination, the BWC and PRRWO still agreed with the RU's original formulation in the early *Red Papers* that self-determination was not equivalent to separation and that separation was not at the center of the black liberation struggle, but they disagreed with the RU's new position that since black liberation in the US required a proletarian socialist revolution first, then the democratic right of self-determination had to be subordinated to the necessity of socialist proletarian unity. The BWC argued that self-determination was the right of minorities to choose which strategy to follow and did not cease to exist in the multiracial working class struggle for socialism. (These polemics are collected in *Red Papers 6*)

My understanding of these issues was drawn from Lenin's theory of the primacy of democracy and my personal participation in the Farah strike support activities (*editors note: the Farah strike was a two year long strike of primarily Latina textile workers in El Paso and New Mexico which ran from 1972-72*). From the perspective of Lenin's theory of democratic revolution, the RU was wrong to contrast a democratic stage of revolution where the right of self-determination applied and a socialist stage where it did not. In Lenin's conception of the relationship between democracy and socialism, democratic rights and democracy had to be won first, so there was no conceptual opposition between a multiracial working class struggle for democracy and the democratic right of minorities to determine their place within it. The Farah strike provides a good illustration of these concepts at work in a practical situation.

In preparation for a rally at a department store selling Farah pants, I met with Bill Gallegos from M.E.Ch.A. (Spanish: Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán: "Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán") to write a leaflet publicizing the rally and explaining what the strike was about. Bill was an advocate of an independent Chicano nation in the Southwest and wanted the leaflet to present the view that the strike was part of that independence movement. I said that was attributing beliefs to the strikers they had not expressed themselves. I suggested we place the strike in the broad history of the Anglo seizure of northern Mexico and subsequent mistreatment of the Mexican-American population, but not inject the issue of an independent Aztlán. We compromised by saying the Farah strike was a struggle for self-determination by the Chicano people without specifying whether the direction of that self-determination would lead to Chicano separation from the US or to a multi-racial working class movement for equality within the US.

My takeaway from this discussion was that the concept of self-determination was larger and more general than whether blacks or Mexican-Americans met Lenin's or Stalin's criteria of nationhood. Everyone involved was making their own self-determination of what was the best strategy for liberation: the Farah strikers; MEchA members; the Chicano members of the RU; and all other strike supporters no matter their race, nationality, or political identity.

The BWC had also argued that self-determination essentially meant the right to choose a strategy and initially called for continuing the RU's original strategy of "building the struggle, consciousness and revolutionary unity of the working class and developing its leadership in the anti-imperialist struggle." They also still agreed that the main form of the black liberation struggle was the "fight against discrimination, the denial of democratic rights, violent police repression, against exploitation and oppression as members of the working class," not separatism. From my standpoint, these formulations could be combined with Lenin's theory of a revolutionary democratic party, which is what I was advocating within the RU at the time; but the BWC and PRRWO went in another direction and moved closer to CL's position on black nationhood and the main task of forming a Marxist-Leninist party, which was understandable given that the largest white Marxist organization had just broken its trust. From there the New Communist Movement continued to fragment and disintegrate.

Conclusion: King and Lenin, Two Vanguard Fighters for Democracy

The New Communist Movement was the last major effort in this country to create a revolutionary party. Despite its early declaration that this party needed to be based on Marxism-Leninism, Mao Tse-tung Thought, the Revolutionary Union was not very centralized in the beginning and held back for four years before switching to Marxist-Leninist party-building from its previous emphasis on developing mass movements. I read Lenin in that relatively loose political and organizational period from 1971-73 and came to the conclusion that democratic equality, including the democratization of the US constitutional political structure, should be the primary strategic goal of the left, not socialism. I thought Lenin's democratic ideological framework solved the conceptual problem of how minority struggles for economic, social, and political equality were playing a leading role in the construction of a larger multi-racial working class movement and party, and I still think this democratic ideology is the framework around which a new party should be constructed, but all of my ideas about this ideology back then came from Lenin, not King.

I had read King's "I Have a Dream" and "Beyond Vietnam" speeches and was generally familiar with his philosophy of racial equality and integration, but I had not read *Stride Toward Freedom* or *Where Do We Go From Here?* until very recently and was not aware of the profound depth of

King's commitment to radical democratic egalitarianism. The left in this country has always faced the dilemma that oppression is stratified, concentrated, and intensified by the color line. That produces a much higher proportion of radical activists in minority communities than in the majority white population, yet in total numbers white and minority activists seem to be very nearly equal. Plus radical minority activists have deeper and stronger roots in their communities than activists who emerge out of the larger white population. This creates a dilemma. King did not believe the black minority could win freedom by itself, but he did believe a minority demanding equality for itself with others could be a leader in a movement of equality for all, much as Lenin argued the workers in Russia could be the vanguard fighters for democracy and equality for all. This structure of social and political forces is not fair. It places a terrible burden on minorities to be the leaders of a struggle for equality for all in order to gain equality for themselves. King was willing to take on that burden and sought allies in this struggle and was killed for it. King's legacy to us is to continue that struggle.