

Black nationalism represents the realization by blacks that our problems are unique. James Boggs delves into the ways in which black revolutionary nationalism can be implemented. The challenge facing blacks is that of developing programs which will revolutionize America so that politics will be put in command of economics.

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James Boggs

The Revolutionary Struggle for Black Power

As we enter the seventies, practically every United States citizen, black and white, recognizes that the traditional view of the United States as a melting pot is no longer valid. Many will insist, quite correctly, that it has always been a myth. It is only one of the many myths, both superficial and fundamental, which the black movement has succeeded in exploding one after another during the last sixteen years.

Today there exist two Americas: one black, one white. For some Americans, black and white, the key question now is whether, or how, these two Americans can ever live together in harmony. For others, the question has come to be whether, or how, they can peacefully co-exist as two entities, geographically and/or politically separate.

Whichever view any particular person may have arrived at, one stark naked fact is now beginning to dawn on most people: there is no simple solution.

It is this stark naked fact—that no simple solution exists—which torments United States citizens, be they black or white. The people of this country have been led to believe that if things were just left to the politicians while they pursued their own individual wants and desires, somehow, some way, some day, some leader would come up with the necessary answers. Now that the working out of solutions increasingly depends upon people themselves, there is widespread confusion and demoralization.

Even the black movement, which has been shaking up and disturbing every section of the country since 1954, has embedded deep within it the illusion that those in power have only to push some buttons, and *presto*, anything they want done will be done. Prior to the eruption of the black movement, this belief in the omnipotence of White Power in the United States took the form of blacks not even daring to dream of doing anything more than what whites would permit them to do.

When the Supreme Court issued its historic decision in 1954, few blacks, North or South, could see how it could ever become effective. Northern blacks, having left the South because they refused to put up with its daily and increasing humiliations and intimidations, could not conceive of Southern whites ever allowing blacks to go to the same school with them. Southern blacks, who had continued to endure this daily humiliation and intimidation, could not believe that they had the forces within themselves or on their side to translate the court's decree from words into fact.

Northern blacks were less optimistic, if possible, than Southern blacks. Having fled the South, they were, like all refugees or renegades, able to recall only the unrelieved horror of what they had escaped. Also, they had become accustomed to accepting the excuse of Northern liberals—that the South is to blame for all the nation's racial ills, including the continuing misery of black lives up North. Believing all this, Northern blacks, during the early years of the movement (from 1954 to 1963), spent their time mostly bemoaning the evils of the South, insisting that "if it was me, I would have left long ago" and boasting of how, if they had remained, they would not be taking the abuse but would be fighting back.

During these early years, movement activities up North consisted chiefly of rallies and demonstrations aimed at highlighting conditions in the South and collecting funds to send South. The appeal was principally to the white liberals and the labor movement for aid to Southern blacks. The sympathetic attitude of most Northern blacks was not too different from that of the white liberals, principally because they had not begun to question their own working conditions up North. During this period Northern

whites in every category, middle, upper, and even working class, were ready to deplore the conditions in the South. And so they did, singing "We Shall Overcome" side by side with blacks and in many instances more fervently than blacks.

Blacks who lived up North were pushing for integration as much as or more than white liberals and radicals; and the more viciously the average Southern white fought against desegregation, the more infuriated Northern blacks became at the failure of the government to intervene directly to enforce it. Reliving or witnessing for the first time the brutality of the South on TV, radio, and in the newspapers, Northern blacks began to search their consciences for ways and means to become more directly involved in the Southern struggle.

The search to become involved led to the freedom rides and to formation of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in 1960-61. SNICK people were those young people who were ready to take a year or two out of school to give to the struggle. At the time it seemed a tremendous sacrifice for these students, but their timetable for involvement reflected the prevailing illusion that there was still a simple solution and that, if only more blacks would join in the struggle, pitting their bodies against the iron will of Southern whites, integration could be achieved in the South as it had been in the North, and the black problem would be resolved.

The wave of sit-ins, stand-ins, ly-ins, and jail-ins which developed at the height of SNICK activity, from 1961 to 1965, took the struggle into every state and practically every county of the South. The young people of SNICK, trying to make concrete what the law had laid down abstractly, were ready to risk their lives in the movement. At this stage the national spokesman and leader of the struggle was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the young preacher who had come to prominence in the Montgomery bus boycott and made the tactic of nonviolence a philosophy. King's dream was that by confronting white resistance with nonviolent black determination, he would arouse the sympathy of liberal whites. This in turn would induce the government to pass civil rights legislation which would legitimize integration as the American Way of Life. What King apparently did not foresee was that

his strategy of *confrontation* would also unveil white violence and barbarism to such a degree that young blacks would reject his philosophy of nonviolence. Hence King was taken aback when, as a result of the increasing mobilization of black street youth, the black community and white police clashed in the streets of Birmingham in May 1963. The explosion transformed the black movement into a nation-wide movement.

What few people realized at the time of Birmingham was that the coming North of the movement would also explode the myth of integration as a simple solution and force the black movement to face the question of the American economic system.

Looking back at the state of the movement in 1963, we can see that nearly everybody approached the problem as if the struggle for rights up North could follow the pattern of the struggle down South. It was only after Northern blacks began to examine the issues and grievances on which to focus their struggle, that they, slowly and painfully, began to realize that *every* institution, North and South, had been structured with the clear-cut purpose of keeping blacks at the bottom, and that the role assigned to blacks in this society since colonial days has been that of the scavenger: to take the leavings in every sphere, whether it be jobs, homes, schools, churches or neighborhoods that whites had discarded or considered beneath them. The condition of blacks in the North could not and cannot therefore be blamed upon the law, as in the South. It was and is clearly grounded in the structure of the society itself. The result is that the Northern movement, since 1963, has been confronted with the dilemma of how to organize a struggle for rights when, according to law, Northern blacks already have the rights for which blacks are still struggling in the South. True, there remains discrimination in areas of public accommodations such as restaurants, swimming pools, hotels, etc., but the grievances which most directly affect the great mass of blacks in the North are clearly those in the arenas of jobs, housing, education, health and welfare, in other words, grievances involving the very structure and operations of American economic and social institutions.

In the last seven years the black movement in the North has tested and discussed many different solutions to this dilemma,

from mass demonstrations to mass rebellions, from voting black to buying black. In the course of its many activities, it has produced a tremendous social force of millions of black people who formerly had been apolitical and apathetic but who are now anxious to act. At the same time the movement has rid itself of a number of illusions: for example, the illusion that integration in and of itself is the solution; or that spontaneous eruptions in and of themselves are the solution; or that militant rhetoric is the solution; or that the unity of sheer numbers is the solution. (In other words, blacks getting together is not the same thing as blacks getting themselves together.) It is now clear that the problem of black people cannot be solved by the most charismatic or most militant spokesmen for black grievances, or by economic aid from city, state, or federal government, or by massive programs for hiring the hard-core unemployed.

Faced with these realities, the black movement is now painfully evaluating its past actions and seeking a program for the future, precisely at the time when its actions have brought into the social arena a white counter-revolutionary force which feels certain that its entire way of life is threatened by the black movement and therefore that it must wipe out this movement before it acquires any more momentum.

Unlike the black revolutionary force, the white counter-forces do not have to search for an ideology before they can plot their actions. Their ideology is that of the existing society: materialism, individualism, opportunism. Even if, as white workers and white middle classes, they do not reap all the benefits from their system, even if they are powerless to affect its major decisions about what to produce or when to go to war, they still believe that it is the best system in the world because it has been the system which has enabled them, as whites, to climb up and over any blacks. It has therefore become for them a system of privilege which they are determined to defend at all costs.

The present cry for "Law and Order" and the prevailing police terror in black communities are not just some conspiracy dreamed up by a few right-wing policemen and Minutemen and then foisted upon the white masses. They are a reflection of what most whites expect and demand from their police force even if it

ends up in a police state. So long as "Law and Order" preserve the American Way of Life, most whites are for it whatever the cost in social injustice.

It is because blacks can see all around them this growing counter-revolutionary force that so many tendencies have developed inside the black movement during the past period. Most of these tendencies are attempts to escape or evade the cold realities of the American economic system and the protracted struggle that is necessary to revolutionize America which is the only way that black people in this country can ever be free.

Among the various solutions which are offered or advocated at the present time to the dilemma of black people in America are: a) a return to Africa; b) the setting up of separate states; c) black control of black communities, leaving the task of changing the "mother country" to whites; d) black cultural separation; e) black capitalism. There are even large numbers of blacks who still believe that they can still be assimilated into this society as the old immigrant groups were, if only they can elect some more black politicians.

Most of these tendencies are led by and reflect the interests of various sections of the black middle classes: professionals, artists, preachers, businessmen, politicians. All of them consider themselves part of the Black Power movement which has dominated the Black Revolt in the wake of Watts, Newark, and Detroit rebellions.

Each of these "Black Power" tendencies, with its particular goal, has some support within the black community. Each one believes that if the black masses would just support its particular solution, the black problem would be solved and the black revolution would have succeeded. Meanwhile, large numbers of blacks still maintain a lingering hope for integration, despite the fact that the manifest failure of integration as a solution was what originally gave birth to the mass rebellions and the Black Power movement.

However, revolutionists cannot determine their perspectives by counting noses. We have to recognize that each of these tendencies has emerged as a sincere effort to give concreteness and specificity to the abstract slogan of Black Power. At the same

time we have to recognize what all these tendencies lack and learn from an evaluation of their limitations.

Whatever may be the present shortcomings of the black movement, it has created the largest concentration of revolutionary social force that this country has ever known. It has also created an unprecedented level of mass political development and of mass efforts to find the correct solutions to real social problems. Within this unprecedented political energy, with the proper political leadership based on a realistic evaluation of the stage of the movement, there exists the potential for mass political consciousness and political struggle on a level never before achieved in this country.

The revolutionary movement of black people inside this country is presently at the Black Nationalist stage. Their conceptions of Black Power are presently still within the Black Nationalist framework. Black people have recognized that there is a uniqueness about their history and about their present conditions of life inside this country which sets them apart from the rest of the people in the United States. They have also recognized that this, which is the basis of their oppression, is also a source of strength. Such a sense of Nationalism could only have been achieved as a result of a long process of continuing struggle which has forced blacks to give up certain myths: i.e., that they can never become like white people; or that it would be desirable to become like white people; or that they will ever be free as long as they are ruled by White Power. The long protracted struggle of the last sixteen years, with its minor victories and its many failures and setbacks, has not only swelled the ranks of the black movement. It has given blacks a sense of their uniqueness and their identity as a nation of people.

Black Nationalism has been and is progressive because it has bound black people together and given them strength, although Black Nationalism in and of itself is not the sufficient answer to the problem of black people. Black Nationalism represents the realization by black people that their problems are unique and that their separation from whites can be a weapon in their struggle for freedom. In this sense Black Nationalism organizes

black people into a "nation" and transforms what the enemy hoped would be a weakness into a source of strength. But black people will have to go beyond the stage of Black Nationalism into the stage of Black Revolutionary Nationalism if they are going to resolve the very real problems of black people, because only Black Revolutionary Nationalism will enable them to attack the real causes of their problem.

Black Nationalism has created a united black consciousness, but black consciousness which does not develop into a real and realistic attack on the causes of black oppression can only become false consciousness, in other words, a breeding ground for the cultism, adventurism, and opportunism which are now rampant in the movement. Black Revolutionary Nationalism involves real and realistic struggles, not only against those who control the very real institutions of this society but also a struggle to reorganize these institutions to make them serve human needs rather than the needs of the economic system for profit and technological development.

In the course of the development of Nationalism inside a colony in Africa, Asia or Latin America, the first step is usually very simple. It is to get rid of the colonial oppressor. The second step is much more difficult because it requires a rapid political development of the people, enabling them to bring about a drastic reorganization of the economic and political system. If this rapid political development does not take place simultaneously with the struggle for national independence or immediately thereafter, the new nation will soon sink back into Neo-Colonialism. This is what has happened with most of the African colonies.

In the United States the problem for blacks is much more complex because our lives and our condition are so bound up with those of the oppressor. On the one hand, we have lived a separate and distinct life. On the other, we have been organic, that is, indispensable and intrinsic, part of the development of the most highly industrialized country in history. Even while we have been systematically denied all the benefits of rapid industrialization, we have been the direct source of the profits by which the country could industrialize itself rapidly. The slave trade created the first profits for a developing commercial capitalism. Black

slave labor provided the raw materials for developing manufacture. In the agricultural era we were kept as slaves on the plantations so that the whites could homestead Western lands and take the expanding industrial jobs in the North. Then as whites began moving up to white collar jobs, we were used to man the dirty jobs on the line. At every stage of economic development in this country, our super-exploitation has been a decisive factor in the country's ability to advance rapidly in the economic arena and in white mobility up the social and economic ladder.

Wherever or whenever we take a good look at ourselves, we have to recognize that in every aspect of our concrete lives and throughout our history in this country, we have been scavengers. We always took the jobs that whites thought beneath them. We have always inherited the used churches, the used schools, the used houses. We live in used communities that are passed down to us only after other groups (all white) have run them down and are ready to move on to newer, cleaner communities. Not only are we at the bottom of the social and economic ladder of American society, our bottom position on this ladder is a necessary part of the system, the part that enables those on top of us to keep climbing.

It is thus impossible to separate the development of our condition and life as blacks in this country from the development of the system itself. Nor is it possible for blacks to free themselves without turning over every institution of this society, all of which have been structured with blacks at the bottom. The climax of this development is our present situation, with 35-50 per cent of our young people unemployed and roaming the streets, each a potential victim of the organized drug traffic. With the advancing technology of automation and cybernation, the unskilled labor of our youth and women has become increasingly expendable. In the cities where we are now concentrated, we survive how we can, no longer needed as producers but constantly stimulated by the mass media to consume the abundance pouring off America's assembly lines.

It is only from this realistic appraisal of the inter-relation between our fate as black people in America and the American economic system that we can develop a positive perspective for

struggle. We are no longer needed in this structure which has been created to meet the needs of rapid economic development regardless of the cost to human beings. Our only salvation is to find a way to break up this structure and replace it with a new structure whose chief purpose is the most rapid and fullest development of human beings rather than the most rapid and unlimited development of technology.

The essence of the American Way of Life has been and continues to be the organization of all institutions for the most rapid economic development as the means for resolving all the problems of the society. The result is constantly increasing investment in highly advanced technology, increasing production of highly-trained specialists to produce and handle this technology, increasing centralization of capital, and increasing concentration of economic and political power in the hands of the relatively few individuals and corporations who control this vast technological apparatus. Accompanying this rapid and systematic technological development and concentration of skills and power at one pole, there has taken place, just as systematically, at the opposite pole and on the lower rungs of the social and economic ladder, a continuing decline in skills, power, and responsibility. At the same time, in the entire society, because of the total reliance on economic development to solve all social problems, there has been a total failure to build any institutions or procedures which might develop the population politically—in social responsibility and in the political skills and procedures needed to cope with social problems.

This has been and is the essential law of development of the American Way of Life. It has resulted in the present extremely dangerous situation and contradiction: that this country is, on the one hand, the most advanced technologically and, on the other, the politically most undeveloped country in the world. With the technique at its disposal to destroy or to advance mankind, it does not have the political consciousness or will to choose one rather than the other. This system has been able to function because the vast majority of whites have accepted the philosophy of economic development as the key to social progress and because they have for the most part been able to benefit from this economic develop-

ment. The chief victims have been blacks, who always stayed at the bottom, scavenging white leavings.

As long as blacks did not dream of reaching the middle or top rungs of the ladder, they were no threat to the system. But sixteen years ago, precisely at the time when the number of positions on the middle rungs of the ladder was beginning to decline because of automation and cybernation, blacks began to feel that they also had a right to climb. Competing with whites for positions on the ladder, they have aroused the fury of these whites who blame them for disturbing what has seemed to these whites a perfect society. Actually blacks have only been exposing the failure of a system which has put economics in command of politics, and which has therefore failed to develop within the population the political institutions and the political consciousness to control economic development and cope with social problems.

The challenge which faces blacks as the ones who have benefited least from American economic development, and who have now been made expendable by this development, is to revolutionize America so that politics will be put in command of economics. This must become the goal of Black Power in the seventies.

In order for blacks to achieve this goal, they must develop programs of struggle that will concretize this goal in stages and in relation to specific issues, constantly escalating the readiness of blacks to struggle against those now in control as well as maintaining their vision of the new society which only Black Power can create in the United States.

In developing programs for specific struggle, it is necessary, *first*, to choose problems which are closely related to the human needs of the masses and at the same time demonstrate the organic weakness of the system to resolve these problems, thereby exposing the system's illegitimacy. *Second*, it is necessary to propose solutions to these problems that involve a change in the existing power relations as well as changes in the structure of operations. These solutions should be of the kind with which people can identify and recognize as legitimate and reasonable, even if not immediately realizable. *Third*, it is necessary to propose concrete organizational steps and struggles which people can be involved in to reach these solutions. Thus every program should: 1) define the

problem; 2) propose solutions; and 3) propose steps by which people can organize and struggle to reach these solutions.

There is no lack of such problems inside the black community. All of the institutions most essential in our daily living—schools, health, industry, housing, welfare, transportation—are controlled by alien elements. Under the control of these alien elements, all these institutions have failed to meet the needs of black people. Now as a result of the spontaneous mass rebellions from 1965 to 1968, all segments of the black community are united in their determination to wrest control of these institutions from whites. The collective will to struggle for Community Control is thus already far advanced inside the black community.

In the course of developing programs for Community Control of all these institutions, we must constantly be developing concepts and procedures for completely reorganizing these institutions to meet human rather than technological needs. For example, we must develop educational programs that will transform the schools from what they are today—training grounds for a professional elite and mass detention homes for the great majority—into community-centered educational institutions that will develop human beings able to govern over themselves and administer over things. We must develop programs to transform the health system from what it is now—a system for the production of specialists further and further removed from the masses and chiefly concerned with making profit, miracle drugs, and biotechnology—into a system which is primarily oriented towards preventive medicine, with medical personnel and health centers close to the people, seeking to develop the broadest self-knowledge and participation of the people themselves in their own health and the health of the community.

In the field of industry, we must struggle to make places of work into places of increased control on the part of those employed and of continuing education, instead of what they are today—virtual prisons in which the workers are robbed of any decision-making powers or any possibility of continuing development.

In the field of housing, we must recognize that housing is a No. 1 social problem for the entire United States, black and white, and that it is impossible to meet the very real needs of human beings,

not only for shelter but for community living, as long as land, financing, construction, and industry remain under the control of private individuals and corporations whose only interest is profit. Whatever activity is programmed by blacks around housing must focus on helping people to understand that the housing problem will never be resolved until the government and the community together take responsibility for Land Reform and for housing construction on a socialized, non-profit basis.

The struggle for Community Control has to be seen as a stepping stone on the road to black control of the major cities of this country and ultimate control by blacks of the national government. Today blacks are already, or almost, the majority in most major cities. The City is the Black Man's Land as it is the land of no other section of the American people. Pouring into the city as an escape from the limitations of the countryside, blacks are now imprisoned in the city because racism blocks the road out. Therefore, in order to survive, blacks must now solve the crisis of the cities, the place where all the contradictions of a system dedicated to economic development at the expense of human needs have reached the point of explosion.

In totally reorganizing the city to serve human needs, Black Power will not only be resolving the problems of black people but advancing the interests of the total society. For example, what kind of transportation is needed today to keep cities from becoming asphalt jungles serving the interests only of the auto industry? Shall we produce subways, homes, and recreation areas—or more highways, parking lots, and air terminals? Shall city codes in relation to garbage, pollution, transportation, and housing be left in the hands of bureaucrats amenable to control by absentee landlords, speculators, and giant industry—or can these matters be placed under the control of popular committees in every part of the city?

Is the city itself going to remain a concentration camp for the reserve army of occasional labor which industry no longer needs—or can it be reorganized into a school for self-government where youth in particular can begin to acquire the will and the skills in identifying and solving social problems, skills which this country so urgently needs? Will the city remain a showcase of glittering

consumer goods, luring young people into covetousness and crime, or can it be made into a living storehouse of human creativity in the art of living and of politics, from which people of all kinds and all ages can learn?

These questions touch on the many problems facing not only black people but everybody in this country, pointing a direction and a challenge for a society which now drifts from assassination to assassination, not knowing where it should go or how to get anywhere but to the moon. To launch this country on this new course will require painful and protracted struggles, but not to struggle to reverse its present course is to assure total disaster for all mankind.

To mount this kind of struggle will mean putting behind us forever the illusion that the masses will on some given day or days spontaneously explode and settle all issues, or that we can wait on some charismatic leader to emerge as our spokesman with a quick and simple solution. Rather we are confronted with the challenge of beginning, quietly and methodically, to form a revolutionary organization of serious, dedicated, and disciplined blacks who have recognized the need for Black Power to revolutionize America and who are prepared to work patiently among the masses to mobilize them for the struggles which will, stage by stage, create pockets of power. These blacks must have no illusion that their task will be completed in months or even in a few years; yet they must be confident that by systematic work and struggle they can develop the forces for fundamental change out of people for whom this change has become urgent but who, like masses all over the world, have been convinced that the problem is insurmountable. To build this kind of organization in the seventies, blacks will, above all, have to abandon their present practice of looking for leaders whom they can parade before the public. Instead, they will have to build the kind of unglamorous organization which makes a working leader out of every member. So long as blacks are more concerned with identifying and being identified as leaders than with gaining victory over the enemy, so long will they be unable to assume the responsibility for revolutionizing this country which, in its decline, is already well on the way to becoming a police state.

To those who remain skeptical about the possibility of Black Revolutionary Power in America, my answer was given in my *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party*:

To the question whether Black Revolutionary Power is possible, the answer is yes. Concretely American society faces only three real alternatives: 1) to continue rotting away as it is today; 2) naked counter-revolution; 3) Black Revolutionary Power. The fact that these are the only concrete alternatives makes Black Revolutionary Power as realistic a possibility as the other two.

The key to the whole question is that the United States cannot go home again.

First, the black community is rapidly approaching the point where it cannot survive unless the present system based upon the exploitation of human labor is abolished and a new society based upon the development of socially responsible human beings is established. The momentum of the black struggle to establish such a society is already well under way and cannot be reversed except by naked counter-revolution.

Second, the black struggle for liberation, coinciding with the struggle of the world black revolution, has already created such turmoil and crisis in the entire society that great masses of people are searching for political leadership to restore to the country a sense of purpose and direction.

Third, inside the white community we can expect increasing conflict, division and splits between a substantial minority demanding the counter-revolutionary crushing of the Black movement, a small minority who are ready to accept Black Revolutionary Power, and the overwhelming majority in the middle who will be immobilized, not because they want Black Power but because they are afraid that resistance to it will reinforce the naked counter-revolutionary repression that, once unleashed, cannot possibly stop with the black community.

Finally, and never to be forgotten, the struggle for Black Revolutionary Power in the United States is developing in the context of international conflict between the world Black revolution and the white counter-revolution of American imperialism, a conflict which the United States cannot possibly win.

This conjecture of historical circumstances makes Black Revolutionary Power possible. It does not make it inevitable. To bring it into being will require a long, sustained and carefully-organized struggle. To ensure the success of this struggle, *the most important task now before the Black movement is the building of a Black Revolutionary Party.*