

Resisting Co-Optation

Perspectives on respectability, power disparities within movements, and the whitewashing of struggle

Pittsburgh Autonomous Student Network

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The Black Lives Matter Schism: Towards a Vision for Black Autonomy

Written by J. Northam

[Black Autonomy Federation // twitter @BlackAutonomist]

The Black Lives Matter movement exhibited a schism since the first few days following the first Ferguson rebellion. I remember watching live streams of the rebellion early on as Ferguson's youth waged small scale urban combat armed with little more than rubble and glass bottles. The heroic resistance to state power, against all odds of victory in forcing a retreat of the occupying militarized police, and in the face of material consequences in the form of a brutal crackdown, was a demonstration of courage that we all should aspire to.

The repression by the armed apparatus of the state in Ferguson (and Baltimore months later) provoked another popular response. But this response took on a different character. It seemed to want to place distance between itself and those who were engaged in combat with the police. Cloaked in a veneer of inclusiveness, it drowned out the original spirit of resistance that the rebelling youths exhibited nights before. The message was "we don't want to be associated with them and we will 'resist' within the confines of rules and regulations given to us by established power".

The latter trend did what it set out to do. It attracted a vast segment of the liberal left, respectable quasi-radicals, nonprofit organizations and sympathetic politicians. There were denunciations of riots, looting, and property destruction as these tactics were considered "infantile" and "alienating" to potential supporters and allies. Think piece after think piece was written about the merits and demerits of various tactics of resisting police occupation. The ones who fought back against the police in Ferguson and Baltimore were touted as "misguided" and "lacking in overall strategy" and they were ultimately left with virtually no material support to continue their organic, grass roots, militant struggle.

This schism between militant resistance and respectability has since become more acute. The mass movement has become amorphous, and what should have been channeled into organic revolutionary energy has dissipated under the weight of having an incoherent structure and lack of a declarative revolutionary political program that includes building international, intercommunal alliances with other Black left movements and anti-imperialist organizations worldwide. This flaw was seized upon by petit bourgeois elements, who have seen fit to reduce the Black Lives Matter movement to a "New Civil Rights Movement", hell bent on simply effecting policy changes rather than assigning it the character of a revolutionary liberation struggle that requires a coherent strategy and a diversity of tactics for its success.

This notwithstanding, there have been enormous organizational strides made by local chapters of Black Lives Matter that have challenged the status quo at an operational level. It shouldn't be overlooked that the overall indictment of institutional racism that the movement has reintroduced into mainstream discourse has indeed had an effect on the consciousness of various strata of the population. The question at hand is whether or not this indictment can be carried through to its ultimate conclusion: that those invested in maintaining our systemic oppression are not fit to rule and should be removed from power. The longer Black Lives Matter waits to answer this question, the more vulnerable it is to co-optation, derailment and ultimately, dissolution.

Naturally, within a power structure that is programmed to halt all revolutionary advances and counter all threats to its existence, the reformist trend within the Black Lives Matter schism obviously picked up the most steam; grant offers from foundations, visits to see liberal capitalist

politicians and airtime on CNN and MSNBC ensured that. Now we have the ultimate bastardization of militant resistance manifested in the form of Campaign Zero, a series of policy proposals that seek to end police violence in America, as if it's possible that an institution founded in order to capture and torture runaway slaves and to protect slave masters' property can be reformed.

Campaign Zero was proposed by so called leaders of the movement and twitter celebrities alike, with virtually no consultation with the mass base of people who put themselves on the line in the streets against the armed apparatus of the state. It is an arbitrary and piecemeal attempt to synthesize militant resistance with the "progressivism" of the Democratic Party, which ultimately leaves white supremacist institutions intact. This overt display of conciliatory politics is nothing short of a betrayal by Black petit-bourgeois liberals who legitimately hate the system, but couldn't garner the fortitude to imagine what they would do without it. It is opportunist defeatism in writing.

Anyone who has a halfway decent grasp of history knows that the wanton destruction of social movements spurred on by establishment liberals is not a new phenomenon. At this point it's formulaic. The Democratic party exists to adapt to the ebbs and flows of social changes in this country in a manner that provides concessions while maintaining the current political economy of white supremacist, capitalist society. This is the Democratic party's only real demarcation from the outward and openly bigoted reactionary Republican party. Both preserve the system. It is not far off to suggest that the rapid resurgence of white nationalist fascism that is currently being nurtured by the political right wing is a safeguard should the liberal wing of the political establishment fail to disrupt the movement and quell Black radicalism entirely.

With Campaign Zero and the corresponding frantic search for support within the current bourgeois political milieu, the reformists within Black Lives Matter are holding their breath for the 2016 elections, where the US ruling class will ultimately decide whether the reactionary or "humanitarian" wings of ruling power will respond to the political unrest in a way that guarantees their continued existence. While this anticipation may signal a decline in movement activity, it should be primer to those activists (who don't have to be reminded that the white supremacist capitalist power structure will remain in place no matter who wins the presidency) to begin to nurture the elements within the movement that are not seeking to coexist with the system.

"Black Lives Matter" should not be declared as an appeal to ruling power or racist white America to accept us as human. They don't and they won't. Our value in this country has always been directly proportional to the amount of profit we produce. With the advent of financial mechanisms that no longer rely on Black labor to produce wealth, we have now become disposable. The increase of extrajudicial murders by the state and relative impunity that racist vigilante murderers of our people seem to have are indicators of this. We say "Black Lives Matter" as a reminder to us as Black people that our lives matter regardless if we're accepted as human by white society or not, and is said as a declaration of resistance to our condition as beasts of burden for capital.

But a declaration is not enough. Neither are policy reforms, symbolic political actions and awareness campaigns. What is needed right now is an entire shift in orientation. A complete overhaul of all of the resources we have and can acquire at our disposal dedicated to the purpose of relinquishing our dependency on the economic system that exploits us; the building, maintenance, and defense of our own institutions and organs of power, channeled for the general uplift of our people, for our people, and by our people. The institutions that the state uses to oppress us must have their diametrical counterpart built by us for liberation purposes and must function to fill the void that has been left by the excesses and crises of transnational capitalism. Responsibil-

ity for the defense of our institutions rests with us, and this defense will also serve the purpose of resisting any and all attempts to put us back on the capitalist plantation.

We must strive for nothing less than the goal of complete self-determination and autonomy of African descended people in the US and abroad, working hand in hand in communal fellowship with other oppressed peoples who have their own contradictions with the power structure. Only by aligning ourselves with the international anticolonial, anti-imperial movement can success be achieved, as we represent only a little less than 13% of the national population.

Our organs of power will create a situation in which dual power will give rise to all manner of reactionary fascism and their corresponding weapons, as we are under siege on two sides: one side by the state that wants to continue our exploitation or annihilate us, and on the other side by the nation's white nationalist and white supremacist silent majority which simply just wants to annihilate us. Organization, preparation, and development of the means to combat these threats is paramount and should be considered an immediate priority.

This is our reality. We do not live in a reality whereby those who are materially invested in our subjugation will suddenly come to their senses, take pity on us, pay us reparations while we ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after like the reformists tacitly imply by their attempts at negotiating with US elites. The rest of the colonized and neo-colonized world is ready to shake off their yoke of oppression the moment it becomes clear that we've made our move. Evidence is seen in the way that African Jews in Israel were inspired by videos of Baltimore's youth overrunning riot squads. The comrades shutting down traffic arteries and battling police in Tel Aviv were hardly inspired by paid activists with forty thousand dollar a year salaries and 401Ks, but by those who heroically abandoned all respectability and asserted their identity as a threat to the establishment.

US fascism would not have established itself so securely, with every safeguard in place and every mechanism utilized at its disposal to stifle the growth of revolutionary consciousness of Black people in the US were we not innately and at our deepest core threatening to the white power structure. Acknowledgement of this orientation puts US fascism on the defensive. A movement of angry Black people should be threatening. It should heighten contradictions, it should make those invested in the status quo uneasy, and it should provoke raging emotions in ourselves as well as our class enemies.

The movement for Black Autonomy, although nascent, is the inevitable outgrowth of a decaying strategy of reformist appeals to power. We know Black lives matter. The question is whether or not we have the capacity to check any attempts at devaluation by counterrevolutionary elements from the outside and from within. The autonomous movement is building this capacity, synthesizing elements of anarchism and revolutionary socialism. Modern examples of this type of political self-determination include the Kurdish PYD/PKK in Syria and Turkey and the Zapatistas and Autodefensas in Mexico.

The autonomous movement explicitly rejects of the kind of separatist reactionary nationalism which is unfortunately endemic to many formations within the Black Liberation movement. It rejects the hetero-patriarchal ethos that women should be relegated to servant status. It rejects the demonization of Black queer and trans people and instead uplifts them as leaders. We hold that one immediately relinquishes the role of "vanguard" if one subscribes to Eurocentric authoritarian hetero-patriarchal standards of gender and their corresponding roles as the norm.

The movement for Black autonomy does not include coexistence with white supremacist authority in its platform. We understand that the development of a scientific, intersectional revolu-

tionary political theory that is applicable to our specific material conditions in the US, and our development of a praxis that tangibly counters the power of white supremacist institutions that control our lives, is the difference between being victims of genocide or soldiers at war. We understand that the striving for autonomy means provoking violent reactionary resistance to our advances. We accept this. We understand that Black liberation means human liberation, so we act in solidarity with the oppressed. Long live the Black resistance. We have nothing to lose but our chains!

Dangers of Funding

Written by Kai

[Filler Collective // AID-USAS Local #13 // Divestment Student Network // Pittsburgh Student Solidarity Coalition // Pgh Autonomous Student Network]

Fuck respectability politics. Social and environmental justice will not be achieved by some suits in an exclusive boardroom meeting. If you don't recall, that's how we found ourselves in this mess to begin with. If you organize within a "professional" or reformist or non-profit framework, you must also recognize the need for others to do revolutionary, explicitly anti-capitalist work. If you are a college student or otherwise not subject to the "real world" like myself and still trying to figure out your place in activism or radical organizing, I urge you to think outside of the non-profit industrial complex and explore ways of living and working that stretch your imagination beyond existing neoliberal and capitalist structures. It can be done.

In early July I shared a space in New York City with young organizers from 10 different states, all at varying stages of creating or growing a student power state-wide network. An organizer out of Philly that I met serendipitously months ago had reached out to me and another friend interested in establishing a Pgh-Philly connection in hopes of growing a more cohesive Pennsylvania-wide movement. A staff member from Student Power Network bought my Greyhound ticket from Pittsburgh to NYC Thursday afternoon – at 6:15am the next day, I boarded my bus. I arrived at the station in NYC around 5:30pm and immediately headed to the Murphy Institute where I was told most of the conference would be taking place. At this point I knew virtually nothing about who organized the meeting, who was going to be there, or the purpose of the weekend.

A charismatic 42-year-old man named Billy Whimsett helped to welcome everyone – Billy would become a large piece of the enigmatic puzzle I was introduced to over the course of the weekend that culminated in a number of presentations at the Ford Foundation intended to entice large-scale donors into funding this new model for a "grassroots" student movement.

I came to learn that Billy was an author, founder of several organizations and incubators, most recently Gamechanger Labs, and had fundraised over \$10 million for politically progressive non-profits and organizations over the years. Gamechanger Labs was the incubator for Student Power Network, which was aiming to replicate state-wide student power across the country after Billy saw what was happening organically with the Ohio Student Association and the Dream Defenders in Florida. A sentiment I heard echoed from different people throughout the weekend was that Billy was a "complicated" character, whatever that means.

The weekend was generally relaxed compared to other intentional conferences/trainings – starting on time wasn't strictly enforced and there was a lot of "structured unstructured" time

where we could bring to the table specific topics/issues we wanted to talk about. I took advantage of this to create space to talk about respectability politics, making activist spaces more accessible and the dangers of the non-profit industrial complex and brainstorming ideas of how to circumvent that.

The first conversation dedicated to respectability politics and the accessibility of “activist spaces” turned into an impromptu people of color caucus where we delved into the dilemma of double consciousness and how it was necessary for organizers of color to be cognizant of how we act and adapt in accordance to ideas of professionalism and well, whiteness. The next conversation we had on how to deal with the growing non-profit industrial complex was ironic given the circumstances of the weekend – several of the folks there were recently full-time organizers who were dependent on grants and other sources of funding to get by.

The other young activists I met throughout the weekend were all on point – radical, militant, and unapologetic. I met several folks that I am sure I will cross paths with again in the near future and look forward to seeing all that they accomplish in the coming years. However, there was a weird tension I felt throughout the weekend because here is the reality – we need money. There’s not a lot of money in organizing. We got bills to pay, kids to feed, and other shit to take care. Although we’d like to dedicate all our time and energy to attacking the imperialist, capitalist, patriarchal system we live in, it’s hard when you don’t got money. One of the most common ways to tackle this is through grant writing and other ways of asking for money from those that do have it. How do we get that money without conceding to the existing power and influence that comes with having money?

After a weekend of learning and fruitful conversations, young organizers from each of the states where a student power network was growing presented on stage at the Ford Foundation in front of wealthy funders who we were told were “on the same page” in terms of our politics, but that was (and continues to be) a hard pill for me to swallow. The Ford Foundation is the second largest foundation in the country and is an organization that has the power to give out million-dollar grants without blinking. It was also created in 1936 by industrialist and capitalist Henry Ford along with his wife, Edsel Ford. Those in the audience, we were told, were once in the same boat as us – young activists dedicated to anti-racist, anti-capitalist organizing. They were now the people young activists had to woo to give them tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars. Immediately it appears there is a glaring conflict of interest – my assumption is that to be in a position of that much money or power is that you play the capitalist game and that it’s in your best interest that the game continue. Here are young people on stage describing actions and organizing efforts in direct confrontation with the current system (that you are profiting off of) and their intentions to build a new one.

Let’s assume that these wealthy funders are all on board with revolutionary change and tearing down the capitalist system. Even at the most basic level of the exchange taking place, the principle behind it is assuredly self-defeating and perpetuating the very power dynamics we aim to change. Here are young folks having to explain to rich (mainly white) funders why the work they’ve done is worth their time and money.

Look at what we’ve done, and lend us legitimacy and give us the power to continue because you, with your money, can determine what history will look like. It’s in your hands.

One major issue with this relationship is the narrative that is being told and how history will be remembered. The climate justice movement regularly erases the work of indigenous people and other people of color because of the overwhelming white narrative. An example of this is

an article that was posted covering a march for Jobs, Justice, and the Climate held in Toronto on July 5th. The article named a bunch of the high-profile “climate leaders” present, such as Bill McKibben, co-founder of 350.org, describing him to have “Done more than almost anyone to put climate change on the agenda, leading the charge...” While McKibben has been on the forefront of denouncing climate change, so have countless others (read: PEOPLE OF COLOR, INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, LOW-INCOME PEOPLE, all of whom are disproportionately affected by climate change and are disproportionately paying the cost of an extractive, exploitative economy), but because of McKibben’s status and power through money, he will be the one remembered as leading the charge ten years from now. *We must intentionally change the narrative or run the risk of perpetuating the very system we claim to be fighting.*

We need not only a redistribution of wealth, but a redistribution done in a radical way. Not a redistribution where those already with money and power and voice are setting the precedent for what a new system would look like. We need funding for revolutionary organizing but must be conscious of how that funding affects our organizing and actively explore ways to challenge traditional models and methods of exchange. With grants, there are often deliverables and tangible results that the recipient must meet and point to in order to justify to the funder that the recipient is doing what they are told. Funding changes the narrative in more subtle ways as well – organizations must cater to certain grants by choosing language carefully and at times even changing their priorities in terms of campaigns, strategy, etc. I’ve heard grant writing described as an art - one must craft a request in such a way that it promises to meet criteria set by the funder but still stay true to the goal that the recipient sets out to achieve. This is a slippery slope. We can see how monitoring language here and there becomes a larger issue when it begins to affect the messaging as a whole.

At the 2015 US Social Forum in Philadelphia, PA, there was a workshop regarding legal aid for future actions at the 2016 Democratic and Republican National Conventions. One of the speakers was a lawyer who was committed to defending protesters and activists. When asked about his opinion on certain tactics used by protestors and what he thought would be most effective, he clearly stated that it was not his role to say. He went on to explain that he stands behind the movement and in order to do so requires trust in organizers and their judgment; he recognized that we each have a role to play in the larger fight for social justice. His role is to guide activists through the legal bureaucratic bullshit and freely deferred questions about organizing to those that were on the front lines. This reflects trust in others in the movement and humility through recognition of our individual roles. Similarly, if we could establish funding in such a way that large sums of money were not given in a coercive manner or as a symbol of power, it could instead reflect trust and solidarity. However, until that day comes, I will be suspicious of large foundations that are notorious for advancing neoliberal and imperialist agendas while professing to be socially progressive. The revolution will not be funded.

How do we move forward from here? What does it look like to challenge ideas of corporatization, privatization and capitalism in the way we organize? I’m not sure – I’m just starting to ask these questions and explore. Thankfully, there’s a wealth of much more experienced folks out there who are and have been actively exploring avenues through worker cooperatives, intentional collective living spaces, and alternative solidarity economies. It’s overwhelming to be sure, but exciting to struggle with the fact that the legitimacy of the rules we live by now are entirely dependent on us being complicit; we need creativity and imagination to start making up our own rules.

“It’s good to see Ford finally putting money back into Detroit,” an organizer from Michigan began his pitch. **And it was good to be reminded of why we’re in this mess in the first place.**

Not convinced in the dangers of the non-profit industrial complex? Check out the comic / zine, “Non-Profit Industrial Complex” Or the book it’s based on, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence

Who’s Co-opting Whom?

Written by A. Sid

[Filler Collective // Students for Justice in Palestine // Pittsburgh Student Solidarity Coalition // Pgh Autonomous Student Network]

For centuries, the American political system has served one primary function: to act as a safety valve for this nation’s most vital dissent. By funneling voters into one of two camps, the American ruling class has effectively nullified any and all populist causes that do not receive lip service from either political party. When one of the parties does decide to embrace the desires of their constituents, they do so in the least effective manner possible, opting instead for surface level changes that appease enough of the population to defuel the cause.

Bernie Sanders’s recent call for a “political revolution” has ignited a fire in the hearts and minds of the Democratic Party’s progressive wing. Sanders’ economic populism is a welcome sight for a nation still struggling to escape the mire of recession. But for many on the left, Sanders’ decision to run as a Democrat is disheartening enough to dismiss him altogether. In conjunction with his stances on the Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people and the Black Lives Matter movement, this has made Bernie seem soft in the eyes of the far left. Once again, our end of the spectrum has chosen to forsake the political process in favor of the tried-and-true methods of direct action and outside agitation.

Herein lies our failure. Our refusal to work with the system is borne out of an entirely justified fear of having our causes co-opted and our missions left incomplete. History has taught us that expecting the system to deliver the reforms we seek is a futile task. But if we’re willing to dig deeper, we find that systemic change can indeed be achieved through the system. A prominent example can be found in the fall of the Soviet Union. In 1989, a bevy of Soviet satellites held elections – preceded by massive protests – which freed these newly independent nations from Moscow’s clutches. By ousting the Communists, the former Soviet republics established democratic systems that, although still plagued by corruption and oppression, allowed for infinitely more freedom than the USSR did.

After centuries of inadequate solutions to economic injustice, systemic racism, excessive militarism, and every other battle the left has fought and lost, our fear is that the system will embrace our cause with one hand and legislate it into irrelevance with the other. But when the people cry out for the destruction of the system itself, the political elite find themselves in a bind: *either deny the people’s wishes and reveal their so-called democracy to be a sham, or accept and cede control over the American political process.*

Drastic restructuring of the American political system is not as radical a cause as one might think. Voters from all walks of life – whether Republican or Democrat, young or old, white or black – feel that the system does not serve them. Specifically, Americans harbor a great deal of resentment towards a bipartisan political system that is increasingly polarized and ineffectual.

Although politically moderate (at least relative to the far left), these citizens can easily be convinced to support a seemingly radical cause so long as it comes draped in the phony fabric of political legitimacy.

As it stands, the only candidate capable of conveying such a message is Bernie Sanders. A lifelong independent, Sanders has repeatedly called for measures – such as the public financing of elections and rigorous campaign finance reform – which would drastically reduce the power of the two political parties. It is not unreasonable to assume that Sanders could be pushed further. But for this to happen, the restructuring of America’s political system must become the defining issue of the 2016 presidential race.

This is where we outside agitators must direct our efforts. **By no means am I suggesting we devote our energy to the Sanders campaign.** Rather, we must create an environment in which any viable presidential candidate must be dedicated to substantive structural reform of the American political system. Thus far, the only candidate for whom such a stance seems feasible is Sanders, but the identity of the mouthpiece matters not. What matters is that the only cause captivating the public during the much-touted first hundred days of the next Presidency be busting the two biggest trusts this nation has ever known: the Democratic Party and the GOP.

The ebb of flow of American political power has reached a pivotal point. We live in a nation ostensibly bound to the democratic process whose citizens feel alienated enough to *abstain from democracy altogether*. In this time and in this place, we have a chance to change everything. Our job? Converting America’s widespread political disaffection into action. Our targets? The very visible elected figureheads preserving the American oligarchy. By making our presence known in the traditional political sphere – through local direct action everywhere we can reach – we can break through the false dichotomy that permeates the chambers of power across the nation. By focusing on campaign finance and electoral reform, we can tap into two issues that draw the ire of broad swathes of the population while also possessing the potential to decentralize political power.

Eliminating legal barriers to entry for third-party candidates would be the next step, ensuring that the most pressing issues – whether local, state, or federal – have someone to speak for them. Further reforms to combat the exclusion of undesirable voters would be needed on a case-by-case basis, in situations such as Jeb Bush’s 2000 purge of Florida’s voting polls or the recent spate of voter ID laws. The specifics can be dealt with later. What cannot be postponed is the struggle to revitalize our democracy.

To many of my comrades who fight to end capitalism and bourgeois democracy, this may appear a betrayal. If our ultimate goal, however, is the decentralization of economic and political power, then certainly any step in that direction is progress – so long as we continue the fight. Furthermore, the existence of a mass movement can serve as a buffer to political subversion, particularly a movement with these goals. So long as there remain voices within the movement clamoring for further decentralization, power cannot remain apart from the people forever. These first steps are nevertheless vital, and it is vital we accomplish them quickly, for the clock is ticking. Climate change poses an existential threat to all humanity and dark clouds of war loom on the horizon. Will our system stand between us and destruction?

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