

# **Black Autonomous Movements**

**New Dynamics in Black Liberation**

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“The main threat to humankind, the flora and fauna and our entire biosphere, is capitalist imperialism: a totally out of control, predatory, global system of accumulation and oppression that’s on a collision course with the limitations of our planet: daily devouring children, women, people of color, the poor, workers of all stripe, wildlife and the environment in pursuit of profits.”

Russell Maroon Shoats, *The Dragon and the Hydra: A Historical Study of Organizational Methods*

“Two features of the new mass movement must be the intention of creating dual power institutions to challenge the state, along with the ability to have a grassroots autonomist movement that can take advantage of a pre-revolutionary situation to go all the way. Dual power means that you organize a number of collectives and communes in cities and towns all over North America, which are, in fact, liberated zones, outside of the control of the government. Autonomy means that the movement must be truly independent and a free association of all those united around common goals, rather than membership as the result of some oath or other pressure.”

Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin, *Anarchism and The Black Revolution*

In the city of Philadelphia in response to the unprovoked brutal beating of a Black man the Askia Coalition Against Police Brutality was created to educate the community about police brutality and to confront police repression while prisoners and their families united to form the Human Rights Coalition, an organization committed to defending the human rights of prisoners. In Miami the Take Back the land movement, a Black collective, moves homeless families into empty or abandoned houses the city has neglected and has even named a section of reclaimed houses “Umoja” (Unity) Village. In Oakland, the once base of the Black Panther Party, the spirit of community based resistance thrives as community activists representing numerous grassroots organizations have organized a People’s Hearing on Racism and Police Repression to challenge police brutality and racism while across the Bay in San Francisco antipoverty activists from the POOR Magazine and Poor News Network raise awareness of economic injustice within communities of color. In St. Louis the Organization for Black Struggle mobilizes grassroots activists and organizations towards community empowerment while in New Orleans grassroots activists within the Black community are at the forefront of rebuilding Black neighborhoods devastated by Hurricane Katrina by demanding government attention and reconstruction.

All throughout the Black colonies of the empire (the United States) local activists and organizations are mobilizing to meet and address the problems and injustice they suffer at the hands of a corporate state that is not accountable to the people, especially poor and working class communities. These activists and organizations for the most part belong to no Black national or centralized movement but instead are ordinary people taking control of their spaces and struggling to live with respect and to enjoy a life of quality and substance. Most of them are Mothers, Fathers, Brothers, Sisters, Friends, Neighbors, etc who have grown tired of depending upon unaccountable career politicians and corrupt political parties to deliver for them. They have decided to seize their own destinies and depend on their own communities to solve problems the state is not interested in solving.

## I. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It is in the spirit and tradition of Black Resistance and Liberation that these communities act. They are the legacy of the Black Liberation Movement (BLM) which at one time represented a strong force within the Black community demanding Self-Respect, Self-Determination, Community and Individual Empowerment and the peoples' control over the resources of their own communities. The BLM was exemplified by Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party, Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the Revolutionary Action Movement, the Congress of Racial Equality, the Republic of New Afrika, Black Liberation Army, etc. These organizations shook the foundation of the empire as their members challenged the racist status quo of America by demanding not only the recognition of Black people's human rights but also our human rights and right to self-determination, community liberation and the complete restructuring of the system through revolution, not integration. They didn't want to accommodate with capitalism, they wanted to destroy capitalism and build a new community and society based on revolutionary values and culture.

These movements of local resistance in the tradition of Black Liberation constitute the legacy of not only the BLM but also the legacy of COINTELPRO, the U.S. government's internal counterintelligence program that systematically destroyed, through assassination, false imprisonment and disruption, the national Black Liberation Movements of the 1960's and 70's that had by 1968 gained legitimacy and mass support within the Black community. Contrary to popular impression the movements did not gain mass support by shouting Black Power or strutting around with guns threatening armed confrontation with the police. These are images the state publicized to create the impression these movements were criminals hell bent on violence and destruction. These false impressions allowed the state to justify its repressive actions towards the movement, actions which included assassination and false imprisonment of young leaders of the BLM. In 1968 the Attorney General of the United States stated that the Black Panther Party constituted the greatest threat to the internal security of the United States. Within two years, by 1970, over 28 Black Panther Party members were assassinated by police agencies across the country and hundreds more were imprisoned on a host of false charges filed to neutralize the strength and popularity of the movement.

The official justification for this massive level of repressive violence against the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Movement according to the government was their members commitment to violence, however when the COINTELPRO papers were released by the U.S. Church Committee in hearings on the COINTELPRO program in the 1970's it was revealed the government's major concern with the Panthers was the massive support they gained within the Black community from their programs that addressed the needs and service of the people. The Panthers and by extension the BLM was at its peak of legitimacy and influence in 1968 within our communities. The year of 1968 was the high tide of the Black Liberation Movement as well as Third World Liberation movements around the world. Capitalism and Imperialism was on its heels, anything seemed possible in these times as the United States was being defeated in Vietnam and urban rebellions were rocking the major cities of the United States and Europe, while guerrilla movements and student activists inspired by the Cuban Revolution confronted U.S. imperialism in Latin America.

Just when it seemed anything was possible and international capitalism was on the verge of collapse, COINTELPRO kicked into high gear and the U.S. government unleashed its full inven-

tory of weapons, repression and dirty tricks on the Black Liberation Movement devastating its members and organizations until it became a hollow shell of its former strength. This is where we find ourselves today, sidelined by the civil rights movement and traditional politicians interested in business as usual within the Black communities a.k.a. Black colonies of the empire. The BLM has been reduced to scattered formations across the United States' urban colonies (Black communities).

Yet as we see today the spirit of the movement lives on as everyday in every urban colony there are ordinary people of color, activists, organizing and mobilizing their communities around issues such as police brutality, political representation, control of community resources, education, mass imprisonment, etc. The same issues that our communities mobilized around in the 60's and 70's. The potential of Black resistance therefore still remains within our communities. Although these local formations of activism are not formally connected they are interrelated nevertheless and speak to the new ethos in the Black liberationist tradition and that is local autonomous movements challenging state repression within their own spaces and with their own ideological positions based on the challenges they face. These autonomous movements constitute a Black Autonomous Movement, though no one has formally adopted that name, their actions constitute such a movement in this phase of our people's struggle within the United States.

## **II. AUTONOMOUS STRUGGLE**

The concepts of autonomy and autonomous struggle actually are not a new experience within our people's history of collective struggle. Within traditional Afrikan society, specifically West Afrikan culture, villages ruled themselves autonomously within larger tribal and ethnic federations. In the United States during slavery escaped slaves, commonly referred to as "Maroons" created autonomous fugitive communities within the dismal swamps of Virginia and North Carolina. Autonomy therefore is nothing new within our collective experience of resistance and struggle. While the origin of the word autonomy has its roots in the Greek language meaning "self" plus "law" its concept is universal and is based on the foundation of all democratic movements: consensus. Anyone involved in grassroots activism understands that nothing can be accomplished without consensus and this is the strength of the Black autonomous movements in the Black colonies. These movements are born of local problems and grievances lead by longtime activists who live within the oppressed communities. No "national" or "vanguard" movement is dropping leaders in on the people explaining to them the correct political line or how best to organize within their own territories. Through consensus these communities have developed solutions to confront the problems they are faced with.

It is necessary to clarify that autonomy and autonomous struggle is about creating alternative and revolutionary systems of community and government within and in opposition to the capitalist and corporate democracies of Western societies. The reality is as radical activists we are not presently in a position to, nor are the people presently inclined to, overthrow the government. So we must carve out our own spaces by meeting the needs of the people within whatever spheres of influence we have within our communities. In doing this we are creating systems of dual power, which is building up autonomous alternatives to the current power structure that controls our communities.

The survival programs of the Black Panther Party are examples of dual power structures created within oppressed communities. In the 60's and 70's the Panthers provided free health clinics, free breakfast programs for children and free grocery packages to senior citizens. They also developed independent schools called Liberation Schools that provided students with an empowering education that instilled cultural pride and a commitment to community and service in the name of the people. The Panthers were able to generate massive community support around these programs and their politics because they identified a need in the community the government wasn't providing and they stepped in to fill the void. Systems of dual power within our neighborhoods enable us to rely upon ourselves while at the same time developing an infrastructure that would hold revolutionary potential and experience should one day in the future the conditions become ripe for revolution or local, regional or national uprisings. Again this ties in with the concept of the Panthers Survival Programs. The Panthers labeled them survival programs because they were programs to provide until the revolution while simultaneously building community support and empowerment. The community is relying on itself, not the state or local government.

Other examples of dual power and autonomous infrastructure that support community needs are community gardens created on abandoned or vacant lots/fields within our neighborhoods that would develop empowering relations among neighbors and could also be used to grow organic food that could be distributed (free) to community members. After school programs and child care (by responsible community members), food co-ops that would provide a space to purchase healthy foods at discount charges (or free if possible), Adult GED and Adult Basic Education classes, Alternative Schools (not Charters!) that could operate after school to offer a education that promotes free thought, cultural/community pride and responsibility, etc. Another empowering tactic that should be considered is the occupation of abandoned houses—there is no excuse for people to be homeless or neighborhoods lacking community centers when there are so many abandoned houses. Activists should seize these abandoned houses and turn them into community center hubs that provide programs that will unite the community. In turn the support these programs will generate from the people will make it difficult for the city or police to enforce an eviction order because we will have turned something that was run down, abandoned and considered worthless into a vital component of the neighborhood that the people could take pride and collective ownership of.

In developing these autonomous programs it must be emphasized that the objective is not to secure nonprofit funding or corporate sponsorship, that undermines the purpose of autonomy. Corporate and nonprofit funding also ties the organization down in bureaucratic paperwork that consumes time and eventually burns activists out as it turns activists into clerks. Whenever possible funding from corporate nonprofits should be avoided, however if it is necessary, then activists must approach the funding not as sponsorship but rather as means to an end otherwise they will surrender autonomy to corporate oversight. They should also (if necessary) seek nonprofit funding from the most progressive foundations they can find but again, this option should be avoided if possible.

Another trap autonomous activists and movements must avoid is electoral politics that consume movements in false promises and expectations. A perfect example is the Obama frenzy. Nothing has changed under this man, his notable achievement of being the first Black President has brought us the same results the first Black mayors brought our cities in the 70's and 80's = nothing! Autonomous movements therefore are not geared toward campaigning for electoral politics. If movements do decide to participate in electoral politics, they should only do so know-

ing that they are only voting for the lesser of two evils and should understand that autonomy is independence from electoral politics that only promote and preserve the status quo. If autonomous activists decide to pursue an electoral strategy it should be local and concentrated on electing block representatives (or block captains) within the neighborhood that would be answerable to the needs and concerns of the people in his/her community while also preserving distance from the established political machine that runs the city. This strategy would not be pursued to reform the political establishment but rather to pressure it from below and erode its legitimacy. Whatever member of the autonomous movement occupies the block captain position should donate her/his paycheck towards the programs the movement is running within the community, otherwise he/she would just be another reformist politician/activist. The United States electoral system is morally bankrupt and merely an extension of corporations and international capitalism. The extension of corporate power and profits is more important than people and democracy in this political system, and we should harbor no illusions about reforming it—our objective is to exist outside it or preferably, to abolish it.

The concept of autonomy and dual systems of power therefore should become more appealing when we consider the real possibility that the nation could go bankrupt or face financial collapse bringing on rapid inflation and loss of social services. It's not far-fetched to consider this scenario considering how close the nation's (and world's) economy came to collapse during the financial crisis in 2008, a crisis that global capitalism has yet to emerge from as of the date of this writing. In the event of another financial meltdown and possible government bankruptcy, communities would be left to fend for themselves. If anyone is in doubt about this just consider the absence of government in New Orleans following hurricane Katrina. The Black community was left to fend for itself as police officers and emergency services pulled out of the city and prevented people fleeing the flood water from escaping, in some instances using deadly force. The objective of the police was to prevent Black people from entering and overrunning the white, rich suburbs that surround the city. If the nation faces financial bankruptcy, we would be derelict in our duty if we believe that the government wouldn't leave our communities to fend for themselves. If it ever comes to this we should be prepared, and this is what autonomy prepares and develops us for (i.e. self-government).

We certainly, however, don't need a national emergency to justify self-government. We face a state of emergency within our own neighborhoods every day when it comes to the state of police brutality, mass imprisonment, unemployment, poverty, poor educational resources and lack of affordable health care. These are the range of issues autonomous activists confront everyday within our neighborhoods. To quote an activist from the book *We Are Everywhere*:

Understanding autonomy includes community owned and run health care, education and social support, direct democracy in zones liberated by the people who live in them, not as enclaves to withdraw to, but as outward looking communities of affinity, engaged in mutual cooperation, collective learning, and unmediated interaction.

This is autonomy and every day that we confront injustice and initiate solutions to our problems, collectively and individually, we are creating liberated spaces within our neighborhoods and most importantly within our minds because we rid ourselves of the mentality that some leader has to swoop into our communities and save us from injustice. Autonomy therefore first starts in the mind, it is the governing of self based on the revolutionary ideas and principles that

the community and I can address and solve our own problems. This should not be interpreted as neighborhood separatism or a reason to carve our neighborhoods into enclaves, that is not autonomy. Autonomy unshackles the mind from reliance on government or outsiders to solve our own affairs. It breeds a confidence of self-determination and creates innovative solutions to problems we are confronted with by placing the people on the frontline in charge of uniting to liberate our own spaces.

Anyone involved in present day community advocacy will recognize this image of people power in motion. Anyone who has ever been in a community center or neighborhood living room, or even a prison cell, brainstorming with fellow activists on how to mobilize people, protests and programs with limited resources, volunteers and time understands the feelings of empowerment these experiences breed. This is autonomous struggle that liberates the individual while he or she empowers the community. It is actual empowerment, it is something tangible that we can feel while transforming our lives and communities.

Autonomous struggle therefore removes the “beloved leader” and “top down” method of organizing from the movement. It promotes and inspires consensus building thinking and decentralized organizations. Too many Black organizations, even ones claiming revolutionary politics, have adopted the corporate leadership structure complete with board of directors or central committees that consult amongst themselves and issue directives to the people or communities they claim to serve instead of involving these communities in the decision-making process, which would empower the community as opposed to the organization. This approach is contrary to autonomous movements which operate from a decentralized posture making decisions rapidly, fluidly and at the service of the people and community by directly engaging them in the process. Previous attempts at centralized leadership of the Black Liberation Movement has been met with resounding disappointment and failure.

For those of us who have been shackled by the outdated politics and rhetoric of the Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movements autonomy should be music to our ears, allowing those of us who were born in the 70's and 80's the opportunity to fashion our own ideas and solutions to the social and racial injustice we are confronting. It is our time to rebuild and refashion the movement as Fanon so eloquently puts it: “Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission and fulfill or betray it”. In this regard, we are not only breaking free from the political reality the state has imposed on us and our communities we are also breaking free from the “messiah” dependence that many of our people and communities used to be trapped in that operated under the assumption Black people must be led to the promised land by a Black leader or organization. No, that is not the case, we will lead ourselves. Any leaders or leadership that emerges would flow from an activist's history and track record of struggle and uncompromising positions when it comes to confronting state injustice as well as commitment to consensus building and new ways of meeting the needs of the community. Also any decisions the leadership arrives at would be the collective decision of the movement after consensus meetings and debate. So the concept of leadership in autonomous movements does not involve a leader directing—rather she/he is being guided by the informed decisions of the movement's members.

There are good reasons for stripping leadership of corporate-style decision-making processes. How many times has the community's interest been compromised or betrayed by national Black leaders like Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton swooping in to take the lead of a protest that local activists initiated only to have them hold a photo-op press conference with local politicians, push aside the local activists and cut a deal that leaves the core grievances in place while highlighting



themselves as responsible negotiators then they hop in a plane and fly off back to their headquarters. These great compromisers take the steam and the initiative out of local activists campaigns and protests. They are more interested in symbolism than substance. Autonomous movements and activists on the other hand focus on substance as opposed to symbolism. Also this critique should not be interpreted so broadly as to imply that no national movement or national movements should exist but rather that movements that possess national structures should allow for autonomy at the local and regional level.

In leading ourselves and developing our own generational ideas and solutions, we should not hesitate to look to other regions of the world that have a history of autonomous struggle. At this moment Latin America is the region with the most dynamic examples of autonomous movements carving out spaces for themselves within urban and rural societies traditionally neglected by their governments. A recommended book to read on these movements is *Dancing With Dynamite: Social Movements and States in Latin America* by Benjamin Dangl. Another idea from Latin America that activists operating within autonomous radical organizations/collectives in the United States should adopt is networking through an umbrella organization similar to the People's Global Action network, a global network of autonomous movements that shares ideas, tactics and strategies related to grassroots resistance and activism. There needs to be an autonomous congress or collective within each city that would allow activists and grassroots organizations to network and share ideas, coordinate protests and, if possible, share resources. These grassroots organizations need to break out of their own spheres of activism, focusing on their issues exclusively, and develop multi-issue campaigns in concert with other grassroots organizations that would connect antipoverty activists with anti-police brutality activists, social justice activists with housing and health care activists, prisoner rights activists with human rights activists, etc, etc. Alliances of solidarity are important in autonomous movements—it prevents the movements from becoming isolated.

### III. AUTONOMOUS CULTURE

Autonomous activism and movements also create an autonomous culture, a revolutionary culture that is directly in opposition to the capitalist “Me First” culture of consumerism that dominates the social, civic and political landscape of our communities. When we are attacking the legitimacy of the state, or rather identifying its illegitimacy, we are also in the process of developing a revolutionary culture that revolves around a system of values based on camaraderie, ethnic solidarity and solidarity with all activists that share our vision of building a new society that eliminates oppression and exploitation, and promotes collective economics and a social and civic medium in which feelings of love, sincere support and commitment are the mediums of exchange as opposed to individualism and the pursuit of a materialistic consumer culture. A person should not be judged on their financial worth but rather on their human qualities. The pursuit of happiness, authentic expression and self-determination in the individual and collective spheres is the cornerstone of autonomous movements.

To quote Che, “At the risk of sounding absurd, I will say that the true revolutionary is guided by feelings of great love.” In this context autonomous movements and communities are not automated enclaves, they are vibrant enclaves with positive and progressive energies where conservatism, patriarchal, or homophobic attitudes should have no place. These traits being stagnant

and in the path of personal and communal development. The values of our society are not rigid moral codes that place us in judgment over one another but are righteous moral values that respect the individual and the community—they are communal values. The environment we seek to create will allow for the full development of an individual’s potential and a new culture and society that releases the full potentialities of human beings. While this may sound like a simple goal, when you think about it, it is truly revolutionary considering we inhabit a society that is completely in opposition to the values we hold and strive to replicate within our communities.

So the culture we are building is an empowerment culture, a communal culture as opposed to a consumer culture and this can only be built through action and mutual cooperation amongst ourselves:

“One of the great strengths of traditional Afrikan societies was their communal democratic composition. This great communal tradition was founded on the deep understanding of the unity of life. Our Afrikan elders understood that the land, the air and the water are God’s gift (or nature’s gift) to all living things. God and Mother Nature did not invent the idea that land, the airwaves and the water are private property. Put another way, the great Afrikan communal tradition teaches us that true liberation cannot exist under a system that allows a few to control the land, water and airwaves”.

— Oba T’Shaka

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

“You have the emergence in human society of this thing that’s called the state. What is the state? The state is this organized bureaucracy. It is the police department. It is the army, the navy. It is the prison system, the courts, and what have you. This is the state, it is an organized oppressive organization.”

— Omali Yeshitela

In conclusion the concept of autonomy and dual power is not about reformism, it’s about liberating ourselves from the oppressive state. We’re not out to be better politicians than the politicians or make the police better police or the corporate state a better corporate state. Autonomy is independence, as best possible, from these entities which we view as illegitimate. Our relationship with government one of opposition and if any relationship is necessary it must be one of pressure and confrontational politics. We can’t pretend to be on the same page, we’re in an all together different book. A book of resistance that the oppressed peoples of the world are presently writing and each autonomous movement and member is a chapter being written in this book of love and struggle.

#### **Recommended Reading**

1. *Dancing With Dynamite: Social Movements and States in Latin America* by Benjamin Dangl. (Note: Chapter One has a great section on the roles and concept of leadership in autonomous movements that emphasizes the consensus building model).

2. "The Dragon and The Hydra" by Russell Maroon Shoats
3. "The New Face of Liberation" an essay by Ward Churchill
4. *The Art of Leadership* by Oba T'Shaka (Note: This book was written in 1990 and a little of it is outdated however it contains an excellent blueprint for grassroots organizing and concludes that ultimately leadership is not an individual but the collective voice/will of the people)
5. *We Are Everywhere* by Notes From Nowhere (This book provides examples of autonomous movements from around the world.)
6. *Maroon Societies* by Richard Price

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