

Comrades and allies: An interview with Donna Murch

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Donna Murch talked with **Sherry Wolf**, author of *Sexuality and Socialism*, in July 2020, in the midst of the uprising against the police murder of George Floyd.

Sherry Wolf: As a historian of the Black Panther Party (BPP) and a radical Black scholar and union militant, how do you characterize the current uprising?

Donna Murch: I think that the urban rebellions we're seeing are very important and very different from the 1960s. To compare and contrast, this period is really an extension of what we saw in 2009 starting with the killing of Oscar Grant by Johannes Mehserle in Oakland at the Fruitvale Station, through to the election of Trump. Non-stop movement organizing. This earlier period was the genesis for the political network, Black Lives Matter, always an umbrella for different grassroots organizing going on in different parts of the country. Some of the organizing in Florida that became visible in 2012 with the murder of Trayvon Martin came out of an earlier case of a young Black man who was literally exercised to death at one of these publicly-funded carceral boot camps in 2006. A lot of the Black students in Black colleges, HBCUs in Florida, organized around it. So we really have had continuous organizing, especially in the 21st century. What I see happening right now is the product of continuous movement.

I think the election of Trump disoriented everyone, and it shifted the national focus from structural racism, state violence, and the Movement for Black Lives to Trump and his base, white supremacy, and right-wing ideology. I'm quite pleased by these urban rebellions. They are large and their geographic spread and their duration is remarkable. It's still happening. I was just reading that a major highway was blocked in Philadelphia, for example. They're very decentralized and all sorts of protests have been going on all over the country for over six weeks. So, in size and scope they're larger than the urban rebellions of the 60s. I think it's going to take us a while to figure out exactly what they mean.

SW: *What do you make of the large numbers of white and other non-Black people participating in these protests?*

DM: In the 1960s, the American economy was booming—that really matters—and African Americans were largely shut out of that prosperity, so the rebellions were overwhelmingly comprised of Black Americans. Both in 1992 in Los Angeles and today, we've seen multiracial protests. Many of the protests I've seen have been majority white. That requires a diagnosis about why that's happening. I can't say that I know for certain. I think it reflects the success of the kind of organizing we've seen over the last decade: that in some ways the vision for the society we want is a society that puts Black life at the center. And even though it's focused on police killings, I see the uprising as a response to the escalation of state violence over the last 50 years and the birth of mass incarceration. The disproportionate criminalization of African Americans is not new. It goes back to the origins of the republic and before, but the sheer size and scale of the state apparatus really took off in the mid-1970s. I think that's another important thing about this movement. It is focused on individual police killings, but it's connected to prison abolition. There's a larger pushback against institutionalized state violence.

One of the things that's complicated about these protests is that they're happening while Trump is president. It also helps to explain the scale and the large white turnout. Trump is so explicitly and violently racist, he's repudiated decades and decades of color-blind ideology, and his presidency comes in the context of this right-wing authoritarian surge in many parts of the world. So I think these protests are genuinely anti-racist, but they're also protests against a cartoon villain. I think if Joe Biden were in the White House now, I don't know if we'd see the same scale of protest. I'd like to hope that we would. There are different dynamics in different cities, but I think part of the multiracial nature of the protests has to do with the anger at Trump.

We'll see what happens when we have a Democrat in the White House. I think it's very likely Joe Biden will be elected, but he's about the worst possible candidate we could ever imagine for this moment—the Law-and-Order Democrat, closest to the Clinton administration, the advocate and co-sponsor of the crime bill. So I'm hopeful about ongoing mobilization, but I'm also cautious.

Solidarity and allies

SW: *Over the last few years the dominant concept of white solidarity with people of color, Black people in particular, has been informed by the idea of allyship. Allyship includes some practices that are positive for white leftists—listening more, making space for others, centering Black people—in the leadership of movements and struggles and unions. But it's a limited framework in which to organize. How do you view allyship?*

DM: One of the problems in the United States is that we still haven't had a proper excavation of the post-World War II social movements. I'm part of a generation of historians who wrote the history of the Black Panther Party, Black Power, and Black radicalism, which is really a vibrant field of the university. Less has been written about white social movements. Susan Reverby's [recent book](#) on Alan Berkman is an important exception. But we really need another accounting of what happened in the 1960s and 70s.

One thing I'm really struck by is how a lot of the new socialist organizations hate the 1960s. Often they'll jump back to earlier periods, what I call "Jack London socialism." They go back to the World War I-era and the 1930s, but there's a real discomfort with the kinds of protest of the New Left. I find that unfortunate because I think there were many wonderful things in the 1960s and 1970s that are extremely relevant today.

One of the most important was the global anti-imperialist character of the Left. In a country as inward-looking as the United States, people were really focused on what was happening in Cuba and China, in Vietnam and West Africa, and especially in Congo. There was a deep and profound internationalism that was looking toward state socialism and anti-colonial struggle, much of it in the Global South. I think that for a younger generation of socialists – especially coming out of the democratic socialist tendency – there’s a tendency to skip over the anti-colonial struggles of the Cold War back to an earlier U.S. or European early twentieth-century socialism. We know that racism was a problem in those movements. To ask why that was happening I think goes back to the racism of American life that certain socialist movements were not, and are not, independent of. I think this skipping over is happening because we haven’t spent enough time valorizing the struggles of the 1960s and 70s.

Donald Freed, a brilliant writer who was snitch-jacketed by the FBI, but who was an important white collaborator of the BPP, wrote a piece in the Black Panther newspaper called “Thoughts on White Suicide.” He was trying to explain why a segment of white people, especially among young people, identified so strongly with the Black movement. His argument was that it started with the assassination of Kennedy and the Vietnam War, and that there was a kind of disillusionment and breaking open of what life is. Essentially, it was this moment of lost ideals and displacement of identity. White students saw their own identity, their whiteness, dissolve, so he called this “white suicide.” To some extent, it’s the way that I think of it today.

This failure to deal properly with the history of the 1960s—the militancy of that era, and the central role that African Americans, Latinx people, and struggles in the Global South played in reconceptualizing the Left—has led some to accept the right-wing account of the 60s. People like Daniel Bell at Columbia argued that these were white, upper-middle-class kids who were slumming. He called it adventurism, which I think is quite unfair. The truth is, if you look at a lot of the 60s social movements, certainly at a place like Berkeley, they tended to be led—like the Black movement—by more working-class kids who’d gotten access to the university. Mario Savio is an excellent example of this. People like Bell argued that this was almost like the lost generation of World War I. He says these were kids seeking a form of escapism, and I don’t think that’s true. I think the 60s are exciting because it was a fault line in the Cold War. The war came home and the level of fury against violence abroad was real. If there’s any usable past we have, this is especially important to us now. War has become so naturalized[,] and because of the difficulty in trying to fight U.S. foreign policy inside the country since the second Iraq War in 2003, the antiwar movement inside the U.S. has really fractured and it’s very difficult to use it as a means of mobilization. There’s been a focus instead on domestic issues of social democracy.

So the current framing for U.S. racial politics is a result of not mining this social history. I would love to see people critically revisit not only the history of the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society], but the National Committee to Combat Fascism—a Panther ally group—the Peace and Freedom Party, the whole anti-imperialist Left. I’m concerned that this history is not being transmitted. It’s actually hard to get a job at a university doing scholarship on the white, or even multiracial, Left. I suspect that’s a reason why this has happened[,] and I’m concerned that the Right has in some ways won the culture war about how to understand the 1960s. The Black Left has reclaimed the Panthers, and today you can write and talk about things you just couldn’t 30 years ago. The country has shifted on that point, but there’s still a lot of amnesia about the 1960s and for me it’s a wonderful, important, and generative period that needs to be revisited again and again.

Core Panther ideology was that they believed in all-Black organization, and they saw that as crucial in order to mobilize the community. But that was not the end-point, that was the starting point. From that all-Black organization, you built coalitions with people based on real-world politics. At the top of that list was fighting the anti-communist war machine, fighting imperialism. And the Panthers had

an anti-colonial vision of domestic politics. They saw the violence against Black and Latino communities at home as an extension of the war machine abroad. They didn't see those as separate theaters of struggle. They saw those as united—the anti-colonial struggles from within and without were united.

Rather than allyship, the Panthers looked for shared political values. They'd choose their alliances based on a group's position on the Cold War, imperialism, and domestic inequality. I really like that and think there's a need to have a shared vision for change. You can have different ways to mobilize. You don't have to have the "beloved community" of SNCC [Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee], or "Black and white, unite and fight." Given the ways that racism works in the U.S., people creating organizations that serve the needs of a Black community and forming strong alliances can work. The Panthers were a powerful blending of all-Black organization and united front. I think we really need that united front right now, and to some extent, we're seeing it in the urban rebellions. Their real task is to turn these exciting mobilizations against police, state violence, and the Confederate past and present into lasting organizational forms.

Challenges for the Left

SW: Ordinarily when we talk of a united front, we think of uniting organizations, groups, and parties rooted in communities and workplaces coming together to fight for common demands. Right now, we see mostly unorganized individuals hitting the streets and the organizational question sort of looms out there in the wings, largely unformed, with the largest socialist organization, DSA [Democratic Socialists of America], somewhat paralyzed as an organization by the upheaval. Individuals from DSA surely participate in the protests, but except for the extraordinary efforts of the small Afrosocialist caucus of DSA, they are organizationally absent so far. Some argue it's a result of their class reductionism and electoral focus, but it also seems to me a reflection of a confusion among their largely white membership about how or whether white radicals should relate to a Black-led rebellion. Newly-developing, white socialists are questioning how to be in solidarity.

DM: I've been sheltering in place and unable to participate directly in most of these protests, but it seems from accounts I've read there are many small socialist and anarchist groups involved in them here in Philly, and I suspect elsewhere throughout the country. I don't think these actions are as spontaneous as they appear since there are these small groupings in lots of places.

I don't know a lot about DSA, though it appears to be a largely middle-class, white group. I'm happy to see the growth of socialism, it makes me very excited. But some of the politics playing out in *Jacobin* and the rude, "dirtbag left" humor of Chapo Trap House is the type of thing that has always damaged the Left. It's an inability to understand and transcend the centrality of racism to capitalism as well as a failure to really grasp the true history of the United States.

The United States is not going to be understood by looking at Scandinavia or Germany. The United States is understood by looking at other settler-colonies like Brazil or South Africa, where racial structures have been the core base of their economies. So whether it's the institutions of racial capitalism or the mobilizations against it, it's very hard to understand how to fight capitalism in the U.S. if you don't put Black and Indigenous people at the center.

There's always been this longing for social democracy, and an idea that if only we read more about it or knew more about its workings, then we can have it here too. I just don't think that's true. It's a historical misdiagnosis. The U.S. is a settler-colony. It's only since 1965 that large sections of the country could even vote. I'm very interested in the history of Northern Ireland because the conditions in the occupied North have all these parallels with the United States. They were still using poll taxes in the 1980s and disenfranchising Irish Catholics. The state was also held together

through mass incarceration of a political movement. So, there's this willful misremembering of the history of modern democracy.

If you want to tell a story about fighting capitalism primarily through the eyes of white workers and white organizations, you're never going to create a mass movement inside the United States. In the last 50 years, the majority of union households have been voting for the right wing. That matters. What happened in California in 1966, when the majority of union households voted for Ronald Reagan, who wanted California to be a right-to-work state, can't be explained without race. It's not like you can strip off race and just talk about class here because a lot of workers didn't vote in their class interest. It's not false consciousness. It has to do with that interplay between race and class and other things. White workers also have significantly more wealth (and higher pay and home ownership) than their Black and Brown counterparts, so dismissing the political and economic structures that underwrite white entitlement is mistaken at best. I think we need a really robust anti-racist Socialism/Marxism that integrates questions of sexuality, gender identity, and gender variance. These are the nodes of true radicalism in the U.S.

Exactly the thing that people talk about as being a weakness in the U.S. is its strength. Because of the nature of our history, you have these strong identity-based movements, and I think bringing them together in the socialist movement is a very powerful thing. And that's the Left we want to be a part of, whether it's in our faculty union at Rutgers, or the flight attendants, or the K-12 teachers' unions that are largely female-led. Of course, the whole Movement for Black Lives is largely queer, female, and non-binary-led. This is part of the United States' true vibrance. Figuring out how to bring these red threads together can be done through leadership and organizing.

SW: Alicia Garza, one of Black Lives Matter's founders, dismisses allyship and posits instead the notion of co-conspiracy. She says, "Co-conspiracy is about what we do in action, not just in language. It is about moving through guilt and shame, and recognizing that we did not create none of this stuff. And so what we are taking responsibility for is the power that we hold to transform our conditions." I like this 'cause it moves away from the interpersonal moral language of allyship to the joint responsibility for taking down structures. Do you think it's possible to build multiracial organization with mutual respect for leadership, ideas, and strategy coming out of this current explosion? Do you think it's desirable?

DM: I don't know. Black people for the most part want to be in Black organizations. It is hard to mobilize Black people in large numbers to participate in majority white organizations. Given the nature of U.S. demographics in which Black people are only 12%, if you're going to have multiracial organization it can't just be parity with the population. It has to be high numbers of Black people participating. I do see theoretically the value of multiracial organizations, but the problem is that so many organizations wind up being majority white given the demographics and the entrenched systems of white supremacy. There are some practical organizing problems that make me understand why the Panthers did the kind of work they did.

Overall, racial structures of power and feeling make it very hard for Black people to enter mostly white spaces, because they often present many problems, at least in my experience, so I don't know. It's really hard for Black and white people to organize together because the sense of white entitlement is so strong. This is just real talk. I think it can be done, but only with sustained anti-racist organizing and the active promotion of Black, Brown, and Indigenous leadership.

SW: Does the goal of an organization alter that dynamic? In a reform group like a union where every worker regardless of their ideas is covered under a contract and the collective goal is to better their situation under capitalism. By contrast, in a revolutionary group, membership is self-selecting and the goal is to upend capitalism. Do you think the revolutionary socialist goal and class composition

make a difference to the prospect for multiracial unity?

DM: That's a really good question and I think my answer is yes, it makes a difference. It does historically. If you look at the role of the Communist Party, problematic though it was in other ways, the Communist Party was the primary Left organization prior to the 1960s that fought consistently against racism. Everything from demanding an anti-lynching provision to defending the Scottsboro Boys to fighting for Blacks' right to unionize, it was the Communist Party that was so important to that—both white and Black communists. And I think the Panthers of the 1960s and 1970s are another incredibly important moment. These are radical anti-capitalist projects, so yes I think that's absolutely true.

I would like to be able to say that there are other opportunities because the problem with this kind of radical organizing in the U.S. is that the Left is so marginal compared to many of the social democratic countries that DSA, and especially younger new socialist groups, are focused on. So it puts us in sort of a strange quandary because I do think it's the anti-capitalist Left and the communist Left—revolutionary socialists, depending on your tendency—that have the best racial politics, but they are also the most marginalized from power.

I would like to say that increasingly, public sector unionism and organizing are important theaters for anti-racist struggle. Here I am especially thinking of contemporary left-led unions like the CTU, UTLA, and Rutgers. We are certainly working towards that in our own union. But I also see the challenges of dealing with white supremacy as an everyday practice: white people's expectation that they are or should be the center, what they want and how they understand the world, it's their voice that should speak and be heard. That's very real. I think you need an active program of trying to figure out how to change this and to raise up other voices in the rank-and-file and leadership.

We had a diversity counselor come to our union and so much of it descended into a psychological discussion that forced people to talk about themselves with guilt and shame. And I didn't find that useful because what I think is most needed are ways to decenter white people and their own sense of entitlement. The best way to do that is to develop leadership of color. As Black and other people rise to leadership, the expectation and anger that it creates in largely white organizations is really off the charts. It manifests itself in deeply psychological ways, but I think you have to see non-white leadership and then you have to figure out praxis.

One of the things that I think is really scary about the Trump era is that I live in a world where no one supports Trump. Right? I live in Philly and work at Rutgers; I'm part of the union and no one I know supports Trump. Nevertheless, what I have witnessed is increasing white entitlement from people who hate Trump. There is a real invigorated sense of white power, and that includes people who consciously oppose Trump and what he stands for. I see that Trump is in some ways larger than just the forms of politics that he espouses. He's creating and fueling white resentment even among those who hate him. So, I think we're faced with a real challenge right now.

I worry sometimes about the way the issues are drawn in these protests. We have such clear villains: police murder and Donald Trump. But there's an enormous continuum of white supremacy both in structural and economic practice, as well as as a lived experience of entitlement that comes from these long-term political and economic structures of racial dominance. It's an enormous problem in the U.S. I'm more aware of it now than I've ever been.

A vision for the future

SW: *I've been to a few of the protests in New York, like those at or around the City Hall occupation, and it's been like Occupy Wall Street meets Black Lives Matter meets the pandemic-depression with*

so many political debates and discussions and a much larger Black and Brown presence than Occupy ever had. Centrally, the questions of leadership and organization come up over and over again. There's a general desire for Black leadership and more organizing forms. What kind of leadership and organization is needed right now?

DM: In terms of Black radical leadership, we need people directly involved in organizing. One of the things that's difficult right now is how to channel massive social unrest into sustained formations. I think we need a leadership that is connected to grassroots struggles of different kinds—coming out of the labor movement, coming out of the fights over immigration, coming out of prison abolition, coming out of organized formations.

I think we need more political organizing and less celebrity that's social media-led and academic-led. We need people who are rising up out of social formations, be it unions or protest organizations. I think we're in such a difficult moment because so much of the Left has been funded through foundations and through private donations. I don't think we're gonna move away from the not-for-profit Left. Unfortunately, that is the core of how the Left is organized now. As problematic as the battles can be in the unions, they are really important because they're connecting to people's everyday lives. There's some movement between the problems that people face on a daily basis and a leadership that's in touch with that, which is very different from the media-led, high-profile celebrity leadership. I think being connected to grassroots struggles is key. A leadership that is also connected to the manner in which the majority of Black people in the United States live. You know, Black people are also fractured by class, and the class divides in the U.S. right now are so strong for all different kinds of groups. Ideally, we need a leadership connected to the struggles that the majority of Black people face.

Some of the most powerful leadership comes from the people who understand the real structures of disempowerment because they've experienced them themselves rather than simply articulating the grievances of others. I think having a Black leadership, just like any leadership, ideally comes from the people themselves.

Capitalism is in a profound crisis right now. I think there's a real opportunity for anti-capitalist organizing that I've never seen in my lifetime. It's important that people really spend time and work out what anti-capitalism is and translate that into their organizational praxis and into ways they build a sense of community with one another. We do need a revived anti-war movement; we really need to take on the enormous imperial structures of the United States. We can never have domestic change if we don't engage with where the majority of the money is being spent by the federal government: its own war machine. So that needs to be reinvigorated. And a real reckoning with what anti-capitalism is. Too often what I've observed is that people check that box, anti-capitalist, but without really deeply thinking through what that means.

I often describe myself as a Cold War Leftist, which means I came of age at the tail end of the Cold War. I was really influenced by it, and my mentors were very much people who were connected to struggles outside the United States, in Grenada, in Cuba, in different parts of the world. So I have a sense that you could have, although imperfect, socialist states succeed. I saw that that could be possible. I knew people from Grenada; I knew people who'd been involved in these struggles outside the U.S., so in that sense it wasn't a complete abstraction to me. As a result, capitalism and liberal democracy were not inevitable to me. That was really important.

One of the problems post-1989 is that we see very few alternatives to the hegemony of capitalism we have in the United States. The political party for most people coming of age after 1989 is this archaic structure that is seen as filled with problems. But one of the advantages of the kind of party structure that I always saw, certainly in the Panthers and other Left organizations, is that it created

a real force and a way to mobilize both political education and organizational structures. I think we need to return to that question of party-based organization. The Panthers could not have functioned as a not-for-profit. They were party-based with democratic centralism—this also includes domination of the leadership at the expense of the rank-and-file, with problems of real gender violence and gender hierarchy, the domination of Oakland over the rest of the country, so I'm not romanticizing it. There were a lot of problems with the party structure, but I don't think we should throw out the baby with the bathwater. I think that we do need a form of organization that is largely volunteer, that is not funded from outside, and that figures out how to get things done.

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