

Only a Class Politics Can Save Us From Police Violence and Fascism

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THE WINTER 2019 EDITION of *New Politics* marks the 100th anniversary of the Social Democratic-led German government's assassination of the towering Polish-born German Marxist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, along with her comrade Karl Liebknecht. An appropriate way to commemorate her life and work is the symposium in this issue dedicated to engaging the award-winning essay by political scientist Cedric Johnson, "The Panthers Can't Save Us Now." Johnson's class dissection of a black version of ethnic politics, his emphasis on democratic organization and debate for social-movement success, his views of the centrality of class struggle at the workplace and in the community and of the need for unifying class demands, all highlight central themes in Luxemburg's work. Below I discuss how Johnson's critique of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement elaborates on these Luxemburgist themes and provides a path to addressing not only police killings, but also the larger capitalist assault that drives them.

The Nationalist Line Is a Class Line

A defining feature of Luxemburg's work is a withering critique of all forms of nationalism and what we would now call identity politics. This comes through in her 1896 article, "The Polish Question at the International Congress in London," which polemized against the Fourth Congress of the Second International supporting independence of Poland, to her 1918 work, "The Russian Revolution," which critiques Lenin's advocacy of the "right of self-determination of peoples" and was written months before her brutal murder. Luxemburg, in these and other works, always emphasized the bourgeois class interests that lie behind nationalist politics' pretenses of speaking for the whole people.¹ "[T]he famous 'right of self-determination of nations,'" she caustically remarked in her polemic against Lenin's famous thesis,

is nothing but hollow, petty bourgeois phraseology and humbug. Under the rule of capitalism there is no self-determination of peoples. ... In class society each class of the nation strives to "determine itself" in a different fashion. ... For the bourgeois classes, the standpoint of national freedom is fully subordinated to that of class rule.²

Like Luxemburg in critiquing the nationalists—of both the oppressed and oppressor variety—Johnson interrogates the claims of Black Power advocates, such as Stokely Carmichael, coauthor of the 1967 classic, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, and the contemporary "Black Power nostalgia" exponents, such as Alicia Garza, co-founder of #BlackLivesMatter. They all promote what he terms a problematic "black unity" politics. This politics is rooted in the theory of "black exceptionalism," whose proponents "insist on the uniqueness of the black predicament and on the need for race-specific remedies."³ Blacks of all classes face, according to Garza, who is a leading light among the new cohort of black unity exponents, a world where they "are systematically and intentionally

targeted for demise.”⁴ The political practice that flows from this theory of black oppression is a unified black politics—with white and other “allies” possibly assisting—directed toward combatting a set of common oppressions and winning a set of demands that address the needs of a unitary black subject.

Johnson subjects “black unity” political theory and practice to historical interrogation and finds that it has produced what he terms an “elite brokerage politics.” This is one that has delivered real material benefits to more-privileged layers of African Americans—who invariably speak for and define the interests of the “black community”—while failing to build a mass, democratically based, “counterpower” that could deliver real benefits to the black working-class majority. This is clearly seen in the evolution of 1960s Black Power to a 1970s and onward black ethnic politics that informs black municipal governance—“really existing Black Power.” The fruit of this politics, Johnson finds, has been the “ascendancy of post-segregation patron-client relations between an expanding black professional-managerial class and the mainstream parties, corporations, and private foundations.”⁵

BLM activists have attempted to resurrect the rhetoric and trappings of an earlier, radical Black Power version of this politics, with an intersectional twist that now incorporates women, gays, and transgender African Americans. But, as exemplified by leading BLM avatars such as DeRay Mckesson and the three founders of #BlackLivesMatter—Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—these activists replicate the racial-broker role. Just as with their older, male, heterosexual competitors whom they seek to displace, they use their mass and social media-conferred movement leadership as “a vehicle,” as Johnson argues, “for entrepreneurial branding and courting philanthropic foundations.”

Johnson does acknowledge that the black unity politics that informs BLM has produced demands, such as those outlined in the *Vision for Black Lives*, that speak to the needs of black working-class communities. But the class-vacuous language deployed by black unity politics, the “black exceptionalism” theoretical framework from which these activists operate, and their own class origins or aspirations tend to result in “movement” demands being repositioned to address the interests of the affluent and pose no real challenge to the capitalist conditions that produce police killings and terror. The rapid response by Ford and other foundations to the BLM phenomenon, in the form of the \$100-million Black-led Movement Fund—which was embraced by BLM activists, many of whom come out of the nonprofit-industrial complex—is designed to guarantee that trajectory.⁶

Like Luxemburg, Johnson unearths the material conditions that guarantee, even more so than in the 1960s and 1970s, that a black-unity politics will be one that serves the black professional-managerial class and their corporate partners. The enormous expansion in class inequality over the last forty years among African Americans, which is even more pronounced than the gargantuan growth of inequality within the class structure as a whole, makes the search for black unity a chimera.⁷ One expression of this growing class divide has been the prominence among the BLMers of charter-school supporters and administrators tied to the finance capital that has pushed for privatizing public education and has sold privatization as “the civil rights movement of our day.” Yet, due to black-unity politics, leaders such as Patrice Collors support working with the increasingly influential black charter-school supporters and other black neoliberals.

How Do We End Capitalist Violence?

While critical of BLM and the racial-unity politics that informs activists who operate under this umbrella, Johnson does recognize the kernel of “good sense” embodied in the *Vision for Black Lives* agenda. The demands address the oppression and exploitation that black working-class people face at both the workplace and in social reproduction. The importance of a working-class movement

addressing the needs of workers on various fronts echoes the criticisms that Luxemburg made in her classic work, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions*. In this seminal study, written in 1906, she criticized the social democratic trade-union leaders who encouraged workers to “place the highest value on the smallest economic achievement” at the workplace, but in the process “gradually lose the power of seeing the larger connections and taking a survey of the whole position [of workers].” Thus, while the German trade-union leaders at the dawn of the twentieth century congratulated themselves on winning wage gains and shortened hours, they were blind to “the simultaneous and immense reduction of the proletarian standard of life” by such methods as “land usury, by the whole tax and customs policy, by landlord rapacity which has increased house rents to such an exorbitant extent, in short by all the objective tendencies of bourgeois policy which have largely neutralized the advantages of the fifteen years of trade-union struggle.”⁸

BLACK PANTHER CAUCUS



From the archives:
Front cover of the
Black Panther Party
auto-workers
newsletter,
GM Fremont, CA
c. 1969

Luxemburg’s emphasis on the whole worker and the need to fight on various fronts, including housing, is central to the political project Johnson advocates. The policing crisis, he emphasizes, cannot be understood as a product of an unchanging, ahistorical “anti-blackness” or a “New Jim Crow.” Rather, it must be placed within the larger context of the four-decade capitalist war from above that has led to the marginalization of increasingly wide swaths of the population. The most marginalized have been the primary victims of the police killings, and while disproportionately black, many whites, along with Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans, have been targeted as well. In fact, Johnson emphasizes, contrary to the “New Jim Crow” analogy BLM and other activists use to characterize police killings, whites constitute the largest number of those killed by the police. This underscores for Johnson that only a broad, multiracial class movement can end police violence. This movement must bring in not only the most marginalized, who are so often the targets of police violence, but the broader working class who are also under attack on various fronts, from loss of pensions to outsourcing, home foreclosures, and other forms of capitalist-induced insecurity and dispossession.

To build this movement, one that can draw in large swaths of the working class, Johnson advocates a program that goes well beyond the limited U.S. welfare state. He calls for the decommodification of housing, health care, education, and other basic needs and the creation of well-paying, socially productive, democratically run jobs and workplaces. This would require a mass direct-government program of employment in public works and public services, one on an even a larger scale than what Bayard Rustin and A. Phillip Randolph called for in their *Freedom Budget* of the mid-1960s.

Rustin, like Johnson, “insisted that black progress could only be achieved through the development of broad, interracial coalitions dedicated to social democracy, a position that drew the ire of some Black Power radicals.”⁹ Presciently, Rustin predicted that the Black Power advocates he crossed swords with in the mid-1960s turning point of the civil rights movement would end up creating a “*new black establishment*” (emphasis in the original).¹⁰ But at the same time, Rustin’s strategy of operating within what he called the “consensus party”—the Democrats—including acquiescence to and support for the Vietnam War and the larger U.S. war machine, doomed any chance of winning his much-needed *Freedom Budget* or even concessions. Johnson’s support for Rustin’s interracial class politics, while criticizing his later turn to “insider politics,” implies that the movement Johnson proposes will need to have its own working-class, democratically controlled political vehicle if it is to make any advances.

Capitalist Barbarism or Revolutionary Socialism

I am finishing this article in the days after the October 28, 2018, election of the fascist Jair Bolsonaro as president of Brazil. Far from an outlier, he is the most dangerous version of a whole layer of fascists, proto-fascists, and authoritarians who have arisen in the decade following the 2008 global capitalist crisis—which continues for broad swaths of the global working class. As Luxemburg powerfully wrote from a jail cell during the carnage of World War I, either humanity advances toward socialism or we face the further “regression of bourgeois society into barbarism.”¹¹ These words have particular resonance today. Either we provide a real, working-class, socialist solution to the multiple capitalist-produced crises confronting wide swaths of the globe, or the fascists will impose theirs.

To find a path out of the horrors of capitalism requires the global working-class movement to engage in serious criticism of our past mistakes. “Gigantic as his problems are his mistakes,” wrote Luxemburg as she sat in a German jail cell in 1915 for her opposition to the war that her former comrades in the German Social Democratic Party supported.

No firmly fixed plan, no orthodox ritual that holds good for all times, shows him the path he must travel. Historical experience is his only teacher, his *Via Dolorosa* to freedom is covered not only with unspeakable suffering, but with countless mistakes. The goal of his journey, his final liberation, depends entirely upon the proletariat, on whether *it* understands to learn from *its* own mistakes. *Self-criticism, cruel, unsparing criticism, that goes to the very root of the evil is life and breath for the proletarian movement* [emphasis added].¹²

The cruel and unsparing, but needed, criticism that Cedric Johnson provides, particularly of ostensibly progressive forces like Black Lives Matter, is exactly what we need if we are to avoid the mistakes of the past and confront the barbarians at the gates today.

Notes

1. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Polish Question at the International Congress in London," [1896] Marxist Internet Library Archive; Rosa Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution," in Mary-Alice Waters (ed.) *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (Pathfinder Press, 1970). Also see her article on the ineffectiveness of Polish nationalists in combatting the oppression of Poles in eastern Germany and the necessity of united, cross-ethnic, working-class solidarity as the only effective weapon. Rosa Luxemburg, "In Defense of Nationality," [1900] especially Section 4, "Nobility, bourgeoisie and people in Poznan province."
2. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution," 502-503.
3. Cedric Johnson, "The Panthers Can't Save Us Now," *Catalyst* (Vol. 1, Issue 1, Spring 2017).
4. Cited in Johnson.
5. Johnson.
6. For critical analyses of the Black-led Movement Fund, of which the Garza-Cullors-Tometi Black Lives Matter group is a leading recipient, see *World Socialist Website*, "Billionaires Back Black Lives Matter," Oct. 11, 2016; Bruce Dixon, "Who Owns the Movement and Where Are They Taking It?" *Black Agenda Report*, Jan. 12, 2017; Paul Street, "What Would the Black Panthers Think of Black Lives Matter?" *truthdig*, Oct. 29, 2017. For the list of fund recipients, see Borealis Philanthropy, "Black-led Movement Fund." On the groups that came together for the vision statement, see The Movement for Black Lives, "About Us."
7. On growing intra-racial inequality among African Americans, see the study published by Credit Suisse and Brandeis University's Institute on Assets and Social Policy (IASP), "Wealth Patterns Among the Top 5% of African-Americans," Nov. 2014.
8. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions," in Waters (ed.), *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, 285.
9. Johnson, 2017.
10. Bayard Rustin, "'Black Power' and Coalition Politics," *Commentary* (September, 1966), 36.
11. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Junius pamphlet: The crisis in the German Social Democratic Party," in Waters (ed.), *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, 357.
12. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Junius pamphlet," 348.