

Revolutionary Black Nationalism for the Twenty-First Century

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Kali Akuno served as the coordinator of special projects and external funding for Jackson Mississippi's late Mayor Chokwe Lumumba. He is co-founder and director of Cooperation Jackson as well as an organizer with the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement. He was interviewed by email by Riad Azar and Saulo Colón, both members of the *New Politics* editorial board.

New Politics: Kali, part of your work and that of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM) has been strategically and organizationally focused on the South. Can you explain the thinking behind this and also how it connects to your understanding of the specificity of the South (especially due to its changing demographics because of the recent migrations of Latino workers) in terms of capitalist power and racism?

Kali Akuno: First and foremost, it is critical to understand that the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement is a revolutionary nationalist organization that is part of the New Afrikan Independence Movement. Revolutionary nationalism is a left-wing variant of nationalism, practiced by colonized and oppressed peoples, that seeks to liberate them from the yoke of their colonizers and oppressors and replace the capitalist-imperialist social order imposed upon them with a socialist social system. The New Afrikan Independence Movement is a multi-tendency movement struggling to liberate the southeastern portion of the so-called mainland territories now colonized by the United States government. The New Afrikan Independence Movement recognizes that territories it is claiming for its national territory rightfully belong to the indigenous nations of Turtle Island, and makes no claims that supersede their just claims. However, our aim is to unite with indigenous peoples and with other oppressed peoples throughout the United States empire and break the back of white supremacy and the settler-colonial project through a unified anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist struggle. So, it is critical to understand MXGM, and its parent organization, the New Afrikan People's Organization, and their commitment to the South in this context.

It is also critical to understand the economic and political role of the South within the colonial-

imperial framework of the United States government. Since the defeat of the Confederacy, the South has largely operated as an internal colony from which cheap natural resources and labor could be readily drawn. This strategic site of super-exploitation provided critical capital accumulation and other developmental competitive advantages to the U.S. settler-colonial project in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that played a critical role in the ascendancy of U.S. imperialism on a global scale later in the twentieth century. And given the structural acknowledgement of colonialism and slavery within the U.S. political framework—specifically the creation of the electoral college, the unrepresentative Senate, and the limited number of congressional districts—the South has always played a disproportionate role in determining the overall politics of the empire. The South typically plays a decisive role in deciding the presidency and the makeup of the Congress, bending both toward right-wing settler-colonialism. This historic reality is what gives rise to the phrase, “as the South goes, so goes the nation.”

The changing demographics of the South, from our point of view, are a welcome phenomenon, in that they offer an opportunity to radically transform the South and the United States overall. In some respects, part of the rapid growth in the Latino population can be viewed as a re-indigenization of the Southeast and U.S.-held portions of North America. Overall this growth potentially weakens the base of white supremacy in the South. We say “potentially” because there is no guarantee that large numbers of Latinos won’t seek to be assimilated and incorporated into the white population, following patterns pursued by southern European immigrant communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There have to be a lot of mutual and intentional unity-building efforts between Blacks and Latinos in order for the transformative potential of this historical development to be realized. Revolutionaries of all nationalities, races, and ethnicities in the South have a decisive role to play in calling for and forging this unity.

NP: A founder and leading member of MXGM, Chokwe Lumumba (who unfortunately and unexpectedly passed away in 2014) was elected Mayor of Jackson, Mississippi. Part of his political work and the organizing behind his campaign was the Peoples Assemblies. Can you explain what they are, where the idea came from, and how they are functioning now?

KA: I would refer people to three works that tackle this question more deeply, these include the “Jackson-Kush Plan” (see navigatingthestorm.blogspot.com/2012/05/the-jackson-kush-plan-and-struggle-for.html), the “People’s Assembly Overview” (see navigatingthestorm.blogspot.com/2014/11/peoples-assemblies-overview-jackson.html), and “Casting Shadows” (see ww.rosalux-nyc.org/en/casting-shadows).

But, in brief, the People’s Assembly is a form of democratic social organization that allows people to exercise their agency, exert their power, and practice democracy in its broadest terms, entailing making direct decisions about the economic, social, and cultural operations of our community, and not just the contractual or electoral and legislative aspects of the social order. The germinating source of the Assembly comes, in the final analysis, from our people’s desire to exercise self-determination.

The People’s Assembly draws from many sources and traditions, going back to the Negro Conventions of the nineteenth century, which were very influential in Mississippi in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the mass meetings of the 1950s and 1960s that fueled the civil rights movement in the state. They also draw heavily on international experiences that include everything from the Paris Commune to the People’s Assemblies in Guinea-Bissau in the 1960s and 1970s, to the Zapatista Assemblies of the 1990s on.

The People’s Assembly is starting to regroup and expand its horizons since the electoral defeat of the deceased mayor’s son, Chokwe Antar Lumumba, in April 2014. It is still debating and

assimilating the critical lessons from the last three years and is consciously working to incorporate these into its work to be a more effective instrument of dual power in Jackson going forward. The primary thing the Assembly is working on now is defeating the effort being led by white reactionary forces in the metropolitan region to seize control of Jackson's water system, either by regionalizing its control board or privatizing it.

NP: The People's Assembly seems to intentionally encourage, and build upon, an anti-racist consciousness that can arise through participatory practices and the building of solidarity between diverse communities. Can you explain the political strategy of people's assemblies and your evaluation of them as mechanisms of popular democracy? Also, how would you compare them to the General Assembly that was part of Occupy?

KA: This is an excellent, but complex question. First, it should be known that national/racial diversity is rather limited in Jackson. Jackson is 80 percent Black, and more than 90 percent of the participants in our Assembly are Black. The greatest expression of diversity in the Assembly is class diversity. The overwhelming number of participants is drawn from the various sectors of the working class. But, there are a fair number of participants that hail from the Black petit bourgeoisie, namely small business owners and professionals (lawyers, doctors, and so on).

By weight of its membership, the Assembly has a working-class character, but it does strategically try to represent a broad multi-class people's front. The reason is that its power is ultimately constrained by the forces of white supremacy that control the economy of Jackson and the statewide political apparatus. White supremacy is still very visceral and apparent in this state, and that creates the imperative for multi-class political forces amongst the Black community in Mississippi.

There are more differences than similarities between the General Assembly of Occupy and the People's Assembly of Jackson. Occupy, at its best, was a classic example of a mass assembly. These types of assemblies are normally short-lived phenomena that emerge during times of acute crisis. Occupy was a product of the acute crisis of 2008, prompted by the bursting of the housing bubble that shook Wall Street and international financial markets. The Jackson Assembly, on the other hand, was intentionally built to last and to address the long-term systemic crisis of white supremacy, colonial subjugation, and capitalist exploitation that confronts Black people in the city of Jackson. As such, it is more of a representational assembly at this point in time, and its leadership, the People's Task Force, is clear that the participation of the masses can and will fluctuate over time. But, the commitment to direct democracy, I believe, is ultimately shared by both.

NP: The assemblies also foster alternative economic models outside the logic of capital, specifically Cooperation Jackson where you currently work. Could you discuss how this model of cooperative economics has been practiced in Black communities and how they connect to your vision of Black Liberation and economic emancipation?

KA: To gain a deeper knowledge of how cooperative economics has been employed in Black communities, I would encourage everyone to read Jessica Gordon Nembhard's book, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Action*. It's a must read.

Cooperation Jackson is a vehicle to advance and execute the vision of economic democracy and transformation contained within the Jackson-Kush Plan. Cooperation Jackson is an emerging vehicle for sustainable community development, economic democracy, and community ownership. Cooperation Jackson is working to develop a cooperative network in Jackson that will consist of four interconnected and interdependent institutions: an emerging federation of local worker cooperatives, a developing-cooperative incubator, a cooperative education and training center (called the Chokwe Lumumba Center for Economic Democracy and Development), and a cooperative

financial institution. To learn more about Cooperation Jackson visit www.CooperationJackson.org.

Now, it is critical to note that while cooperatives have a long history within the Black community, particularly in Mississippi, there are two things that make Cooperation Jackson's experiment unique. First, it is largely an operation to start a network of predominantly worker cooperatives, and, second, it is in an urban setting. Working in urban environments has been limited in the South, and worker cooperatives have been very limited in the South. So, we are treading on some new ground and there will be a great deal of experimentation over the course of the coming years and decades in our work.

The drive to build cooperatives is first and foremost driven by the need to break the back of the white-controlled paternalistic capitalism that exists in Mississippi. On a deeper level, however, it is an effort to create economic democracy in our city and the state and to facilitate a just transition from the agricultural, extractive economy that dominates our local economy (and that of the world). Our people are clear that they no longer want to be the "speaking tools" of capitalist exploitation and are seeking creative ways to end this psychotic system.

NP: Could you talk about the role of MXGM and other similar organizations in supporting and helping to build the movement that has developed since Ferguson? Please also discuss the impact of the report Operation Ghetto Storm that your organization released in 2012 and 2013.

KA: There is a spontaneous side and a historic buildup side to the current reawakening of the Black Liberation Movement that has emerged in the wake of the Ferguson rebellion.

MXGM without question has played a central role in the historic buildup over the past twenty years, but particularly the past ten years. I think we have to look at the current reawakening as a response to the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina. The disaster in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina exposed that the U.S. government was politically willing to discard Black people en masse, particularly those sectors of the Black working class that have largely become surplus and superfluous to the cycle of capitalist production in the United States. Black radical consciousness, I argue, has been gradually transforming and advancing in the wake of this catastrophe in qualitative ways. If we look back critically, we see a pattern of Black mass resistance that emerged in 2006 - 2007 and that started with the movement to defend the Jena 6. This pattern of mass outrage and mobilization continued and advanced after the extrajudicial killing of Oscar Grant in 2009 and has remained consistent in various ways since (Trayvon Martin, Kimani Gray, on down).

Operation Ghetto Storm (better known as the *Every 28 Hours Report*), I believe, laid a solid foundation for the reawakening that we are experiencing now. It revealed the extent to which Black people are considered disposable by the state and started a dialogue regarding what we can and must do about it. Unfortunately, most of the analyses, demands, and program that were contained in that work and its supporting works, including "Let Your Motto Be Resistance" (see mxgm.org/let-your-motto-be-resistance-a-handbook-on-organizing-new-afrikan-and-oppressed-communities-for-self-defense/) and "We Charge Genocide Again" (see mxgm.org/we-charge-genocide-again-new-curriculum-on-every-28-hours-report/), have not yet been fully digested by the movement. But this is part and parcel of the ideological and political struggle that takes place within any mass movement. Going forward, it is critical that MXGM and organizations like it struggle with the masses to get them to understand that the U.S. settler-colonial project is beyond reform and that the capitalist-imperialist world system must be transformed and overcome and replaced by a new social system that respects the limits of the Earth's productive capacities if our species is going to survive.

NP: The most well-known expression coming out of this movement has been "Black Lives Matter," which shares an acronym with the Black Liberation Movement. How would you describe this

movement in terms of civil and human rights versus revolutionary Black Nationalism? What does Black Nationalism mean in the context of neoliberal capitalism and the fact that the United States will be majority minority at some point?

KA: Black Lives Matter must be understood as a multi-tendency formation and budding movement. In my opinion it should be contrasted with the Black Liberation Movement, but must be seen as an expression of this long movement. Black Lives Matter, as both organization and movement, is still growing and still defining itself. It has developed some demands, but these are still very much in flux and advancing (or contracting, depending on chapter and context, as I understand it) with each passing day, and each emerging location of struggle—as can be seen from its recent responses to the Baltimore rebellion. Its most distinguishing feature and contribution to date, I think, has been an elevation and highlighting of women’s and queer struggles within the Black community. In this regard it is simultaneously an internal challenge to the community itself as well as an external challenge to the society at large, both of which are needed.

Now, Black Lives Matter as an organization has radical leadership, who I know are all committed anti-capitalists and anti-imperialists. However, moving the organization and the movement in this direction is going to be a struggle and it is going to take some time. The overall weakness of anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist movements in the United States means that the broad base that the organization is drawing from has little experience with these radical ideologies and social systems. We’ve confronted this limitation within MXGM for over 25 years, so we know the challenges. But, this is a new moment where folks are learning more in a few days than most typically learn in decades. So, one shouldn’t discount where this movement might land in terms of its politics and ideology. It’s too premature to do that.

That said, the movement is contending with the dominant accommodationist tendency that exists within Black politics. The organization and the movement have had to contend with efforts to distort and water down the meaning of the slogan and with its appropriation to advance narrow demands by many of the established civil rights groups. How the organization and the movement deals with this struggle will be telling, because the pull of the accommodationist forces and the capitalist and Democratic Party forces that back them is very, very strong. All I can say is that for my part, I’m going to continue engaging and encouraging this organization, and the many organizations that developed since the Ferguson rebellion, to adopt revolutionary ideology and politics and not become appendages of the Democratic Party.

Now, on the second part of your question, I think it should be made clear that it is the revolutionary nationalist tradition that has carried the banner of human rights within the long Black Liberation Movement. The civil rights and accommodationist tendencies fundamentally jettisoned the struggle for human rights in the early 1950s, when they succumbed to anti-Communist “red-scare” politics and made a Faustian bargain with the United States government for the limited degree of civil and political rights the settler-ruling class was prepared to offer. This narrowed the struggles for self-determination and economic, social, and cultural rights, and we are living with and trying to overcome the horrible outcomes of this bargain now.

Now, the question regarding the relationship between Black Nationalism and neoliberalism is complex, one that would take several volumes to satisfactorily address. But, let me say this, that as with all nationalist movements, there are left, right, and center tendencies. Some of the more right-leaning nationalist tendencies have accommodated themselves to the logic and imperatives of neoliberalism quite comfortably. In fact, it supports certain long-standing but narrow calls for Black capitalism, in the form of promoting types of Black ownership and businesses that only foster and create capitalist formations. It also expresses itself socially, for example, in calls for things, like private schools and even charter schools, that don’t seek to serve an anti-colonial or anti-imperialist

agenda, but merely a variant ethnic or racial self-interest.

The revolutionary nationalist tradition understands neoliberalism to be another form of capitalist accumulation and imperialist domination and vehemently opposes it. But, the ascendancy of neoliberalism has seriously undermined the revolutionary nationalist movement in a number of ways, and the movement still has not adequately addressed its weaknesses in the face of this ideological, political, and social onslaught. And if we don't get a grip on this, the changing demographics will count for nothing transformative, as the system will adeptly pit one people against another people, one working class sector against another, and each individual against all. So, we have some major, major work to do on this front.

NP: Could you discuss the impact of past World and U.S. Social forums on the development of current movement work, as well as give an update on the upcoming social forum in the summer of 2015 and its people's movement assembly?

KA: To be honest, at first the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement was not too excited by the World Social Forum (WSF). We thought it was too liberal and possibly a distraction from the growing anti-globalization movement that was emerging on the scene when the WSF first got started in 2000. Initially we were much more invested in more explicitly anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist international movements and convergences like the International League of People's Struggles, which emerged slightly before it.

Overall, our assessment of the WSF being very liberal hasn't changed, but our stance on engagement has. The shift for us was Hurricane Katrina and the recognition that our people and our movement had entered into a new historic phase relative to the systems of white supremacy, U.S. colonial subjugation, and imperialism: a phase of disposal. To try and counter this we figured that we needed to galvanize the broadest possible level of support for our people and our movement, and the WSF was one of many venues to do that.

Now, overall, I think the WSF played a tremendous role in facilitating linkages between social movements throughout the world in the 2000s, particularly in the absence of radical international forces such as the Communist International and the demise of the movements linking the radical national liberation and socialist movements that existed in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, with formations like the non-aligned movement, the tri-continental movement, the movement for a new international economic order, and so on. This contribution cannot be discounted or diminished.

But, there are many questions as to whether the convergence model employed by the WSF and its regional and national expressions, like the U.S. Social Forum, can lead to the necessary movement coherence that is needed to eliminate capitalism and the ever-growing threat of climate change and ecocide. The 2015 U.S. Social Forum is an effort to change the model to facilitate concentrated dialogue about movement coherence. But, the organizing process for this forum has confronted many challenges, some due to perceived sectarianism (real or imagined), more drawn from concerns about what premature notions of coherence might mean (or damage), and some drawn from the fear of funders about what a genuine left force in the United States might foster. Time will tell.

In Jackson, Cooperation Jackson is engaging the 2015 U.S. Social Forum by hosting a Southern-oriented People's Movement Assembly focused on a just transition. This Assembly is part of the Climate Justice Alliance's Our Power Campaign's "Summer of Our Power" (see www.ourpowercampaign.org). The People's Movement Assembly is going to be held on Friday, June 26 through Sunday, June 28, 2015, at the Chokwe Lumumba Center for Economic Democracy and Development, located at 939 W. Capitol Street, Jackson, Mississippi 39203.

NP: Could you introduce Grassroots Global Justice Alliance? What's does GGJ do and why?

KA: MXGM is a proud member of the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance and has been a member since 2006. GGJ is celebrating its 10-year anniversary this year (2015).

GGJ was initially born to facilitate the participation of U.S.-based grassroots organizations with the WSF. Its aim was to further the development of grassroots internationalism between forces in the United States and those in the global South. It has remained true to this mission, but has steadily enhanced the mission—and its vision—since 2005. There are now nearly 70 organizations in the alliance, and it is now key to the grassroots struggle against climate change in the U.S. and recently facilitated the start of the first U.S.-based chapter of the World March of Women. So, GGJ is on the move. For more information about GGJ visit ggjalliance.org.

NP: What's your view of the politics of solidarity in the United States in light of these assemblies and forums, as well as the increase in direct action protests by diverse allies responding to their understanding of their role in, and critiques by, Black-led movements?

KA: In short, the growth of these activities is good, and the politics of solidarity is advancing by leaps and bounds. But by no means has it grown deep or broad enough for it to be transformative yet. We still have a long way to go to build the strength needed to transform the United States, meaning the end of its colonial domination of North America and its imperialist grip on the rest of the world and ending the capitalist system and the threat of climate change. We can't settle for easy victories where we know there is far more work to be done.

Footnotes