

James Boggs
**Black Power: A
Scientific
Concept Whose
Time Has Come**

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Black Power. Black Power. This is what is being written about and talked about in all strata of the population of the United States of America. Not since the specter of Communism first began to haunt Europe over one hundred years ago has an Idea put forward by so few people frightened so many in so short a time. Liberals and radicals, Negro civil rights leaders and politicians, reporters and editorial writers – it is amazing to what degree all of them are fascinated and appalled by Black Power.

The fact that these words were first shouted out by the little-known Willie Ricks and then by Stokely Carmichael to a crowd of blacks during a march to Jackson, Mississippi, in the spring of 1966 has heightened the tension surrounding the phrase. For earlier in the year the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which Carmichael heads and of which Ricks is an organizer, had issued a public statement on American foreign policy condemning the war in Vietnam as a racist war and connecting the black movement in this country with the anti-imperialist movement in Asia. In that same period, SNCC had begun to analyze the role white liberals and radicals could play in the movement, aptly characterizing it as one of supporting rather than decision-making. Coming after these statements, the cry of Black Power was seen by most people as deepening the gulf between the pro-integrationists and the nationalists. Whether or not Carmichael had intended this cannot really be determined since the phrase had scarcely left his lips before the press and every so-called spokesman for the movement were making their own interpretations to fit their own prejudices or programs.

When Malcolm X was assassinated in February 1965, every radical in the country and every group in the movement began to seize on some slogan Malcolm had raised or some speech he had made or some facet of his personality in order to identify themselves with him or to establish some plank in their own program. The same process of attempted identification is now taking place with Black Power. The difference, however, is that Black Power is not just a personality or a speech or a slogan, as most radicals, liberals, and Negro leaders would like to regard it. The immediate and instinctive reaction of the average white American and the white extremist or fascist is far sounder than that of the liberal, radical, and civil rights leader. For these average whites reacted to the call for Black Power simply and honestly by reaffirming “white power.” Their concern is not civil rights (which are, after all, only the common rights which should be guaranteed to everyone by the state and its laws). They are concerned with power, and they recognize instinctively that once the



Jacob Lawrence, *Migration Series*, panel 45, 1941. This painting is accompanied by a set of captions issued by the artist, the first in 1941: "They arrived in Pittsburgh, one of the great industrial centers of the North, in large numbers."

issue of power is raised it means one set of people who are powerless replacing another set of people who have the power. Just as Marx's concept of workers' power did not mean workers becoming part of or integrating themselves into capitalist power, so Black Power does not mean black people becoming part of or integrating themselves into white power. Power is not something that a state or those in power bestow upon or guarantee those who have been without power because of morality or a change of heart. It is something that you must make or take from those in power.

It is significant that practically nobody in the United States has tried to seek out the extensive theoretical work that has been done on the concept of Black Power. Actually, most of those writing for and against Black Power don't want to investigate further. They would rather keep the concept vague than grapple with the systematic analysis of American capitalism out of which the concept of Black Power has developed. In *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook*, I stated my belief that if Marx were living today he would have no problem facing the contradictions which have developed since his original analysis, since his method of analysis itself was historical. I said further that I considered it the responsibility of any serious Marxist to advance Marx's theory to meet today's historical situation, in which the underdeveloped – i.e., the super-exploited – nations of the world, which are in fact a world underclass, confront the highly developed capitalist countries in which the working classes for the most part have been incorporated or integrated into pillars of support for the capitalist system. Yet such an analysis has not been seriously attempted by either American or European Marxists, who have not seriously grappled with: 1) the fact that Marx specifically chose England (at the time the most advanced country industrially in the world) as the basis of his analysis of the class struggle in terms of the process of production; and 2) the fact that at the same time the European workers were beginning to struggle as a class against the capitalist enemy at home, this same class enemy was expanding its colonial exploitation of Africa, Asia, and Latin America and thereby acquiring the means with which to make concessions to and integrate the working class into the system at home. Therefore, the working classes in the advanced countries were to a significant degree achieving their class progress at home at the expense of the underclass abroad. It was Lenin who dealt with this question most seriously when the European workers supported their capitalist governments in the first imperialist world war, and it was Lenin who found it

necessary to deal seriously with the anticolonialist character of the black struggle in the United States. Yet today, nearly a half century after the Russian Revolution and after two generations of European workers have shown themselves just as opposed to independence for the peoples of Africa and Asia as their capitalist oppressors, European Marxists are still using the slogan "workers of the world, unite" and evading the scientific question of which workers they are calling on.

Who is to unite? And with whom? The underclass of Africa, Asia, and Latin America which makes up the colonized, ex-colonized, and semi-colonized nations? Or the workers of highly developed Europe and America, whose improved conditions and higher standard of living have been made possible by colonial exploitation of the world underclass? Isn't it obvious that the working classes of Europe and America are like the petty bourgeoisie of Marx's time and that they collaborate with the power structure and support the system because their higher standard of living depends upon the continuation of the power structure and this system?

The United States has been no exception to this process of advanced nations advancing through exploitation of an underclass excluded from the nation. The only difference has been that its underclass was inside the country, not outside. Black men were brought into this country by a people dedicated to the concept that all blacks were inferior, subhuman savages and natives to be used as tools in the same way that machines are used today. The phrase "all men" defined in the Constitution as "created equal" did not include black men. By definition, blacks were not men but some kind of colored beings. It took 335 years, from 1619 to 1954, before an effort was made to extend the definition of manhood to blacks. Yet American radicals sought to propagate the concept of "black and white, unite and fight" as if black and white had common issues and grievances, systematically evading the fact that every immigrant who walked off the gangplank into this country did so on the backs of indigenous blacks and had the opportunity to advance precisely because the indigenous blacks were being systematically deprived of the opportunity to advance by both capitalists and workers.

The United States has a history of racism longer than that of any other nation on earth. Fascism, or the naked oppression of a minority race not only by the state but by the ordinary citizens of the master majority race, is the normal, natural way of life in this country. The confusion and bewilderment of old radicals in the face of the Black Power concept is therefore quite natural. United States and European

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radicals accept white power as so natural that they do not even see its color. They find it perfectly natural to exhort blacks to integrate into white society and the white structure but cannot conceive of its being the other way around. Integration has been an umbrella under which American radicals have been able to preach class collaboration without appearing to do so. Under the guise of combating the racism of whites, they have actually been trying to bring about collaboration between the oppressed race and the oppressing race, thus sabotaging the revolutionary struggle against oppression which, by virtue of the historical development of the United States, requires a mobilization of the oppressed blacks for struggle against the oppressing whites.

There is no historical basis for the promise, constantly made to blacks by American radicals, that the white workers will join with them against the capitalist enemy. After the Civil War the white workers went homesteading the West while the Southern planters were being given a free hand by Northern capitalists to re-enslave the blacks systematically. [...] The present so-called white backlash is just white people acting like white people and just as naturally blaming their white hate and white anger not on themselves but on the blacks wanting too much too soon.

[...]

Black Power in the United States raises the same question Stalin could not tolerate from Mao: Would the revolution in China come from the urban workers or from the peasantry? Mao pursued his theory, based upon the specific conditions in China, and was proven right by the revolution itself. In the United States today, the question is whether the blacks (over 75 percent of whom are now concentrated in the heart of the nation's largest cities) will lead the revolution or whether they must await the white workers. In the twentieth century the United States has advanced rapidly from a semi-urban, semi-rural society into an overwhelmingly urban society. The farms which at the beginning of the century still employed nearly half the working population have now become so mechanized that the great majority of those who formerly worked on the land have had to move into the cities. Their land is now the city streets. Meanwhile, industry itself has been automated, with the result that black labor, which over the centuries has been systematically deprived of the opportunity to become skilled, has become economically and socially unnecessary. Unemployed or underemployed, the now expendable blacks are a constant threat to the system. Not only must they be fed in order to cool off the chances of their rebelling, but they occupy the choicest and most socially critical land in the heart of the

nation's cities from which the racist white population fled in order to remain lily white. Moreover, since blacks have become a majority of the inner-city population, they are now in line to assume the political leadership of the cities in accordance with the historical tradition whereby the largest ethnic minorities have successively run the cities. The city is now the black man's land, and the city is also the place where the nation's most critical problems are concentrated.

Confronted with this dilemma, the power structure, from its highest echelons to the middle classes, is seeking to incorporate or integrate a few elite Negroes into the system and thereby behead the black movement of its leadership. At the same time, the power structure has devised ingenious methods for mass "Negro removal." Under the pretext of "urban renewal," it condemns and breaks up entire black communities, bulldozes homes, and scatters the black residents to other black communities which in turn are judged to need "urban renewal." Meanwhile, under the auspices of white draft boards, black youths are sent as cannon fodder to die in the counterrevolutionary wars which the United States is carrying on all over the world as it replaces the old European colonial powers. Today the sun never sets on an American Empire which maintains bases in at least fifty-five different worldwide locations. The war in Vietnam is a war of sections of the world underclass fighting one another, for it is the poor, uneducated, unemployed who are drafted and the privileged (mainly white) who are deferred. This United States counterrevolution all over the world has the support not only of the general population but of organized labor. A peace demonstration in any white working-class or middle-class neighborhood brings out a hostile mob which is sure to come even when the peace demonstrators are allegedly guarded by police.

Those progressives who are honestly confused by the concept of Black Power are in this state of confusion because they have not scientifically evaluated the present stage of historical development in relation to the stage of historical development when Marx projected the concept of workers' power vs. capitalist power. Yesterday the concept of workers' power expressed the revolutionary social force of the working class organized inside the process of capitalist production. Today the concept of Black Power expresses the new revolutionary social force of the black population concentrated in the black belt of the South and in the urban ghettos of the North – a revolutionary social force which must struggle not only against the capitalists but against the workers and middle classes who benefit by and support the system which has oppressed and exploited blacks. [...]

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The uniqueness of Black Power stems from the specific historical development of the United States. It has nothing to do with any special moral virtue in being black, as some black nationalists seem to think. Nor does it have to do with the special cultural virtues of African heritage. Identification with the African past is useful insofar as it enables black Americans to develop a sense of identity independent of the Western civilization which has robbed them of their humanity by robbing them of any history. But no past culture ever created a revolution. Every revolution creates a new culture out of the process of revolutionary struggle against the old values and culture which an oppressing society has sought to impose upon the oppressed. The chief virtue in being black at this juncture in history stems from the fact that the vast majority of the people in the world who have been deprived of the right of self-government and self-determination are people of color. Today these people of color are not only the wretched of the earth but people in revolutionary ferment, having arrived at the decisive recognition that their undevelopment is not the result of ethnic backwardness but of the systematic confinement to backwardness by the colonial powers. The struggle against this systematic deprivation is what has transformed them into a social force or an underclass.

The clarion call “black people of the world, unite and fight” is only serious if it is also a call to black people to organize. The call for Black Power in the United States at this juncture in the development of the movement has gone beyond the struggle for civil rights to a call for black people to replace white people in power. Black people must organize the fight for power. They have nothing to lose but their condition as the wretched of the earth.

The call for Black Power is creating – had to create – splits within the movement. These splits are of two main kinds. The first is between the Black Power advocates and the civil rights advocates. The civil rights advocates, sponsored, supported, and dependent upon the white power structure, are committed to integrating blacks into the white structure without any serious changes in that structure. In essence, they are simply asking to be given the same rights which whites have had and blacks have been denied. By equality they mean just that and no more: being equal to white Americans.

[...]

Inside the Black Power movement there is another growing split between the idealists or romanticists and the realists. The romanticists continue to talk and hope to arouse the masses of black people through self-agitation, deluding themselves and creating the illusion that one set

of people can replace another set of people in power without building an organization to take active steps toward power, while at the same time agitating and mobilizing the masses. Masses and mass support come only when masses of people not only glimpse the desirability and possibility of serious improvement in their condition, but can see the force and power able to bring this about.

The realists in the movement for Black Power base themselves first and foremost on a scientific evaluation of the American system and revolution, knowing that Black Power cannot come from the masses doing what they do when they feel like doing it, but must come from the painstaking, systematic building of an organization to lead the masses to power. [...]

The organization for Black Power must concentrate on the issue of political power and refuse to redefine and explain away Black Power as “black everything except black political power.” The development of technology in the United States has made it impossible for blacks to achieve economic power by the old means of capitalist development. The ability of capitalists today to produce in abundance not only makes competition on an economic capitalist basis absurd but has already brought the United States technologically to the threshold of a society where each can have according to his needs. Thus black political power, coming at this juncture in the economically advanced United States, is the key not only to black liberation but to the introduction of a new society to emancipate economically the masses of the people in general. For black political power will have to decide on the kind of economy and the aims and direction of the economy for the people.

“The City Is the Black Man’s Land” laid the basis for the development of the type of organization which would be in tune with the struggle for Black Power. Such an organization must be clearly distinguished not only from the traditional civil rights organizations which have been organized and financed by whites to integrate blacks into the system, and thereby save it, but also from the ad hoc organizations which have sprung up in the course of the struggle, arousing the masses emotionally around a particular issue and relying primarily on the enthusiasm and good will of their members and supporters for their continuing activity. By contrast, an organization for Black Power must be a cadre-type organization whose members have a clear understanding, allegiance, and dedication to the organization’s perspectives and objectives and who have no illusions about the necessities of a struggle for power.

A cadre organization cannot be made up of

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just enthusiastic and aroused people. Its essential core must be cold, sober individuals [...] who recognize the absolute necessity of a strong leadership who can organize and project a strategy of action to mobilize the conscious and not-so-conscious masses around their issues and grievances for a life-and-death struggle against those in power. Such a cadre must be able to continue the revolutionary struggle despite the inevitable setbacks because they believe that only through the revolution will their own future be assured.

At the same time that it recognizes the inevitability of setbacks, such an organization must build itself consciously upon a perspective of victory. [...] The movement for Black Power cannot afford to lose other Malcolms, other Emmett Tills, other Medgar Everses, and it must build the kind of organization which has the strength and discipline to assure that there will be no more of these.

Nor can such an organization build itself on the counterrevolution's mistakes or abuses of the masses as the civil rights movement has done. Rather it must seriously plot every step of its course – when to act, when to retreat, when to seize upon an issue or a mistake by the ruling power and when not to.

Within such a cadre there must be units able to match every type of unit that the counterrevolution has at its disposal, able not only to pit themselves against these but to defend them. Colonialism, whether in Asia, Africa, Latin America, or inside the United States, was established by the gun and is maintained by the gun. But it has also been able to hold itself together because it had skilled, disciplined colonizers and administrators well versed in the art of ruling and able to make the decisions inseparable from rule.

There will be many fundamental questions and problems facing such an organization as it moves toward power. How will it create new national and international ties with other people within the country and without? What will it do about industry when its takeover is imminent and those in power resist? What will it do about the armed forces and how will it win over? In what cities or localities should a base first be built? What will it do when confronted by those in power as they respond to the threat of replacement? What segments of the old apparatus can be useful and which should be destroyed? And most important, how can it expose its alleged friends as the real enemies they are? [...]

As I said in *The American Revolution*, the tragedy is that so few see the urgency of facing up to this reality. But as I also said, that is what makes a revolution: two sides – the revolution

and the counterrevolution – and the people on both sides.

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James Boggs (1919-1993) was an auto worker, activist, and intellectual, author of *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook*.

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