

United States (1960s-70s): Huey P. Newton and the Last Days of the Black Colony

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Huey Newton's shifting political analysis illuminates both the limits and the ongoing relevance of the radicalism of the Black Panther era.

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In August 1970, Roy Wilkins, the sexagenarian leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), used his syndicated column to criticize Huey P. Newton for urging the formation of an all-black fighting unit to assist the Vietnamese National Liberation Front. Newton cofounded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense with Bobby Seale in 1966 and had recently been released on a technicality after spending thirty-three months in prison for the killing of Oakland police officer John Frey. Wilkins saw Black Power militancy as cynical and misguided. "The Viet Cong may be hurting," Wilkins wrote, "but nothing like the hurting of John Q. Black American. . . . Of course, Huey knows about this suffering. It was the resentment over this treatment that led, at least in part, to the founding of the Black Panthers. But Huey, for all his talents, is also a revolutionary. Revolutionaries get confused."



Huey P. Newton (Wikimedia Commons/Richard Aoki Collection)

When he emerged from prison a month earlier, Newton addressed his supporters from atop the hood of a car. Wanting to bask in his newfound freedom, Newton took off his shirt, revealing a taut frame, the reward of a punishing jailhouse regimen of push-ups. Young and defiant, he was the physical embodiment of the new militancy that contrasted sharply with Wilkins's graying demeanor and bourgeois comportment. And yet, in contrast to the popular image of the fiery Black Power orator, Newton was charming but soft-spoken, and his public speeches were delivered in a nasal, breathless tone and a more deliberative manner than the soaring rhetoric of his contemporaries like Eldridge Cleaver and Stokely Carmichael.

In his response to Wilkins's accusation of misplaced priorities, Newton defended the party's domestic survival programs: free breakfast for schoolchildren, free health clinics and sickle-cell anemia screenings, free clothing and shoes, loans to welfare mothers, and bus trips for the families

of prison inmates. Newton charged that Wilkins's criticisms reflected his "obvious class interests and identification with the ruling circle" and belied his commitment to a reactionary internationalism, namely his support for Israel. "Black People in America have long been affected in a negative way by America's war of imperialism," Newton wrote. "We are internationalists because our struggle must proceed on many fronts. While we feed and clothe the poor at home we must meet and attack the oppressor wherever he may be found."

Newton's withering critique of Wilkins's ideological capitulation and hypocrisy came at the height of the Panthers' popularity. In a few short years the Black Panther Party had grown from a local organization created to confront police brutality on the streets of Oakland and Richmond, California, to, as Students for a Democratic Society put it, the "vanguard of the black revolution" and, in the eyes of Federal Bureau of Investigation director and arch-anticommunist J. Edgar Hoover, the "greatest threat to the internal security of the country." If the Black Panther Party was the most iconic organization of the Black Power era, Newton was easily its most popular, recognizable figure. The early propaganda photo of Newton seated on a wicker throne with a carbine rifle in one hand and a spear in the other captured the spirit of the age and continues to haunt popular memory and lore of the 1960s, decades after he was gunned down at only forty-seven years of age during a drug dispute in 1989.

Like the broader movement he gave birth to, Newton's life was at various turns inspirational and tragic. Following his release, Newton struggled to integrate back into party life. The international campaign to win his freedom had made Newton a powerful symbol of the organization, but in many ways the party had outgrown his command, and others vied for influence beyond the Bay Area. The combined weight of heightened police repression and his own paranoia fueled Newton's addiction and reprehensible behavior. His rhetoric and political courage inspired thousands to stand against war, racism, and imperialism, and yet at other moments he succumbed to personal acts of brutality and self-destruction.

Newton's political formation came amid the new nationalist militancy of the early 1960s, but the primary period examined here is a very brief historical window, a mere six years, from the establishment of the party in 1966 to Newton's pronouncement in 1972 that the party was "putting down the gun" and finding ways to work within the American system. This time frame also corresponds to the birth of "Black Power" as a political slogan and the consolidation of radical and moderate forces around black ethnic politics at the 1972 National Black Political Convention held in Gary, Indiana. The year 1972 also marked a critical turning point in the Cold War, with Nixon embarking on a diplomatic visit to Mao Zedong's China, beginning the process of normalization between the two nations and foreshadowing the turn to liberal economic reform under Deng Xiaoping.

This period is the one most celebrated by historians of black radicalism who venerate the Panthers' left internationalist politics. There is a willingness to openly criticize the liberal bourgeois politics of black elites, the misogyny and sexism of black radicals, as well as the essentialist and escapist elements of black cultural nationalism, but the left internationalism of the Panthers and other tendencies is typically spared from critique.

Newton and the Panthers deserve to be studied and debated because so much of their analysis and political practice addressed ghettoization, racist policing and incarceration, mass unemployment, and failing schools, problems that defined the urban crisis of the 1960s and have grown more intense and graver in our own times. But while I am sympathetic to the historical project of left internationalism the Panthers embodied, I want to offer a critical analysis of some of the central ideas offered by Newton that were at times widely shared among Black Power radicals and continue to shape left approaches to U.S. inequality.

Newton's political ideas evolved from a formative nationalist period, where he and other black radicals embraced concepts from decolonization struggles, to a more speculative left period after his 1970 release from prison, when he offered more original approaches to thinking about American empire and potential paths to socialism. Whereas the formative period grew out of his experiences in Oakland's black ghetto and were organized around the pursuit of black national liberation through armed self-defense and serving the people, the latter period was shaped by the expanded platform Newton gained as a celebrated political prisoner and focused increasingly on a notion of socialist revolution predicated on popular control of the forces of production. These transformations in his thinking were also undoubtedly influenced by the process of black political incorporation that was unfolding across the nation. The concomitant expansion of the black professional-managerial class and hyper-segregation of the black urban poor would spell the end of the black colony as a geographic reality and as a central thematic of black political discourse.

The colonial analogy was powerful as a means of connecting both the second-class citizenship endured by blacks and the grim human toll and social contradictions produced by American commercial and military power abroad, made so visible by counterinsurgencies and coups d'état around the globe, from the Congo and Indonesia to Cuba and Vietnam, actions orchestrated by the Central Intelligence Agency to undermine left populist movements and destabilize socialist regimes. As Newton discovered, however, such attempts to transpose modes of thinking born in the colonized world onto the advanced industrial context of the United States could not pinpoint the specific political and economic manifestations of empire that Americans faced on the domestic front, nor deliver an analysis that might have united black and white, suburban and urban, unionized and nonunionized, waged and unemployed into a counterpower capable of transforming American society. Newton came to terms with the limitations of the colonial analogy and offered precious insights regarding the unique problems facing Americans who would oppose empire from within, but he reached these fresh conclusions just as the social struggles of the 1960s were entering a phase of demobilization.

The Black Colony

In 1942 Huey Percy Newton was born in Monroe, Louisiana, the youngest of Walter Newton and Armelia Johnson's seven children. Walter Newton was a Baptist preacher, sharecropper, and, at one time or another, worker in the local sawmills and sugarcane mills. The reconfiguration of American capitalism that began during the Depression years would propel the Newtons westward and create the social conditions that shaped Huey Newton's political thinking and social ideals. Through the policies of the New Deal and the wartime mobilization that followed, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration would orchestrate the development of a new Keynesian state-market order defined by greater regulation of financial markets and an expanded social wage, labor protections and profit-sharing arrangements that gave birth to a consumer republic, and the norms and expectations of American middle-class life as we have come to know them. Black life was radically transformed through these midcentury reforms as well, but Newton would come of age in a world still circumscribed by the color line.

In 1942 the Newtons joined the wartime caravan of Southern migrants flooding the East Bay in search of work in the region's shipyards, military bases, and docks. Black Southern migrants were integrated into a segmented labor market, occupying lower-skilled and low-wage jobs, and they were among the first to feel the jolts of peacetime demobilization and changes in industrial technology that continued apace in some sectors during the 1950s. By 1959 some 25 percent of Oakland's population lived below the poverty line, with 10 percent earning less than \$2,000 annually. Oakland, Richmond, and East Palo Alto also saw population loss and economic divestment due to

suburbanization during the postwar period.

As Newton later recalled in his autobiography, Oakland was subdivided into two worlds where radically different class realities seemed to be sculpted into the local topography. The hills and the affluent area known as Piedmont were the exclusive enclaves of the white middle classes and the wealthy. "The other Oakland—the flatlands," Newton wrote, "consists of substandard income families that make up about 50 per cent of the population of nearly 450,000. They live in either rundown, crowded West Oakland or dilapidated East Oakland, hemmed in block after block, in ancient, decaying structures, now cut up into multiple dwellings."

In school Newton struggled with disciplinary problems, reading, and his teachers' racist low expectations, and when he graduated from high school he was functionally illiterate. With the help of his older brother Melvin, he taught himself to read. His path to literacy and intellectual life was similar to Malcolm X's: a combination of crude methods, self-discipline, the solitude of the prison cell, and ultimately the camaraderie and lively debates of the various political study groups he encountered after enrolling at Oakland City College in 1959. It was there he met Bobby Seale, and the two became active in the Afro-American Association, where they read voraciously and sharpened their analysis of American history and culture, poring over W.E.B. Du Bois's Progressive-era essay collection *The Souls of Black Folk* and Ralph Ellison's critically acclaimed postwar novel *Invisible Man*, as well as Booker T. Washington's autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, and James Baldwin's paired essays on racism and religion, *The Fire Next Time*. Although Newton and Seale would eventually leave because they were dissatisfied with the group's "armchair intellectualizing" and lack of practical action, the Afro-American Association and other East Bay Area black organizations such as the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) provided the two young activists with an education in ideas emerging from the new nationalist movement of the early 1960s.

The "new nationalism," or "new Afro-American nationalism" offered a searing critique of the civil rights movement that captivated the young Newton. In contrast to the Southern movement with its Christian ethic of conciliation and agape love and its focus on attainment of formal citizenship rights, the new nationalism was defined by its emphasis on economic self-determination and rhetorical posturing toward revolutionary violence. Most advocates were skeptical that Jim Crow segregation could be defeated. They saw racism as foundational to American society, and the weekly incidences of police and mob violence against blacks, the mass arrests endured by peaceful demonstrators, and the extent of official inaction and complicity only steeled their cynicism regarding the prospects of an integrated society. Some, like Nation of Islam minister Malcolm X, advocated armed self-defense against segregationist attacks, and in a few places, groups and individuals like the Deacons for Defense and Justice in the border towns of Louisiana and Mississippi, and NAACP leader Robert F. Williams in Monroe, North Carolina, actually took up arms and engaged in skirmishes with Klansmen and others who threatened black lives. With the exception of these Southern efforts, however, the new nationalism's adherents were mostly urban and based in the North.

A unifying ideological thread among the new nationalists was their insistence that blacks were in fact a colony residing within the confines of the United States. This argument constituted a sharp reprisal of Cold War liberal characterizations of racial inequality as a sectional conflict, rooted in folkways and customs that contradicted the nation's cherished democratic ideals. The act of naming blacks a colony was a defiant expression of solidarity with national liberation struggles throughout the colonized world.

The colonial analogy can be traced back through the thought of various black nationalist and radical left figures. The ex-communist and essayist Harold Cruse, however, was the most immediate author of the colonial analogy in the early 1960s. His 1962 essay "Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American," published in the journal *Studies on the Left*, quickly became required reading among the

new nationalists.

Cruse charged that American Communists had not come to terms with the growing conservatism of white industrial workers and the implications of the emergence of colonized nations as a revolutionary force. They expected the proletariat in the advanced capitalist nations to lead the struggle for socialism, but Cruse claimed the colonized world had taken the lead. "The revolutionary initiative has passed to the colonial world," he argued, "and in the United States is passing to the Negro." Although Cruse tends to overstate the bankruptcy of organized labor and white workers here and elsewhere in his writings, his comments point to legitimate political problems created by the institutionalization of capital-labor conflicts under New Deal social democracy.

Newton's formative two-part essay "In Defense of Self-Defense" offers some exposition of the colonial analogy. "It is our belief," Newton wrote, "that the Black People in America are the only people who can free the world, loosen the yoke of colonialism, and destroy the war machine. Black people who are within the machine can cause it to malfunction. They can, because of their intimacy with the mechanism, destroy the engine enslaving the world." The essay gives a clear sense of Newton's optimism about the unity of the black colony. He argued, "Black people must now move, from the grass roots up through the perfumed circles of the Black bourgeoisie, to seize by any means necessary a proportionate share of the power vested and collected in the structure of America."

Despite their critical posture toward black political elites throughout the period, black radicals were hampered by this dominant ideological commitment to race unity and notions of political allegiance grounded in identity. Actual material and ideological differences were either not fully acknowledged or viewed as inconsequential; most often these cleavages were seen as externally driven, incidental, and capable of being surmounted through political unity.

During the 1960s, African Americans confronted American empire not as colonial subjects but as citizens who were historically disenfranchised under Jim Crow and were undergoing a belated and incomplete process of incorporation into the consumer society, what some termed at the time the "Second Reconstruction." The black population was composed primarily of the most submerged and dispossessed segment of workers but also by a stratum of professionals, merchants, and public employees. Whereas Cruse would emphasize the leadership role of the ghetto bourgeoisie, and later that of creative intellectuals, in advancing the interests of the black colony, Newton and the Panthers would side with the most maligned social force, the so-called lumpenproletariat. Newton and Seale decided to found the Black Panther Party because they felt that other black nationalist organizations were not firmly committed to organizing "brothers on the block" but were instead "too content to sit around and analyze without acting."

The Lumpenproletariat as Vanguard?

Newton and Seale saw the black communities of the East Bay as occupied territory where inhabitants were routinely subjected to police surveillance, intimidation, and violence. Drawing inspiration from the community patrols that were organized in Watts after the 1965 rebellion and the armed self-defense tactics of Robert F. Williams in North Carolina, Newton and Seale took to the streets with sidearms and law books to monitor police activity in Oakland. Their allegiances were to the black laboring classes. Newton summarized the dire economic predicament so many experienced in the black ghetto as "like being on an urban plantation, a kind of modern-day sharecropping." For the young Newton not much had changed since the debt peonage his parents had endured in North Louisiana. On the plantation, he wrote, "you worked hard, brought in your crop, and you were always in debt to the landholder." "The Oakland brothers worked hard and brought in a salary,"

Newton continued, "but they were still in perpetual debt to the stores that provided them with the necessities of life."

Newton's affinity for the lumpenproletariat was, at its root, personal. He had traveled the same mean streets as the poorest masses, sharing their hardships. He was spurned in school. He committed petty crimes such as robbing parking meters, forging checks, and burglarizing homes. Even after he enrolled at Oakland City College, he passed time in pool halls, and in 1964 he was sentenced to six months in prison for stabbing Odell Lee with a steak knife at a party, an incident that Newton held was an act of self-defense. "The street brothers were important to me," Newton wrote, "and I could not turn away from the life I shared with them. . . . I felt that I could not let college pull me away, no matter how attractive education was. These brothers had the sense of harmony and communion I need to maintain that part of myself not totally crushed by the schools and other authorities."

Newton and the Panthers saw the lumpenproletariat as potentially revolutionary, because unlike those more secure segments of the unionized working classes who could now afford homeownership and middle-class lifestyles, this most submerged stratum was banished to inner-city ghettos, failing schools, and a lifetime of chronic unemployment and poverty. Newton and others like fellow Panther Eldridge Cleaver increasingly saw the black subproletariat, and not the industrial working class, as the new vanguard, because the intense conflicts over desegregation and the black urban predicament had birthed more powerful political forces.

There are at least three problems worth noting with the valorization of the lumpenproletariat in Newton and other Panthers' political theory. First, there are vast differences in numerical proportions, economic origins, social power, and political consciousness of the "dangerous classes" that inhabited the factory towns of the nineteenth-century English midlands, the urban centers of China and colonized nations after the Second World War, and the American ghettos that Newton, Cleaver, and others confronted in the late 1960s. The urban black unemployed and unemployables did not always pose a direct threat with respect to competition over waged jobs, but in the popular imagination they constituted a potential threat to the consumer lifestyles and property rights of the middle class. The New Right cast the poor as a tax burden on the self-governing middle class, who shouldered responsibility for the poor's housing, healthcare, and basic needs through public assistance. As surplus population, the black urban poor were subjected to an even more powerful and elaborate police state apparatus and intensified spatial segregation in the wake of 1960s urban rebellions.

Second, while Newton and others within the party found inspiration in anticolonial struggles, they erred in thinking that the strategies that were effective in the Third World decolonization movements, particularly those that waged guerrilla warfare, were applicable to the context of America's advanced industrial society. The revolutions that Newton cited as inspiration—the Cuban Revolution, the Algerian Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and Kenya's anticolonial struggle—evolved over time and within specific historical conditions. And in most cases their methods, strategies, and uses of political violence achieved success only after these movements had secured popular legitimacy. The context the Panthers confronted was quite different. Despite the widespread popularity of their legal defense campaigns, no one could argue credibly that the Panthers ever garnered national-popular support for their vision of socialist revolution, and certainly not the level of mass support needed to wage guerrilla war toward that political objective. The American situation, including that of African Americans, held more in common sociologically and politically with the events unfolding in Paris during May 1968, with its factory takeovers, student strikes, and immigrant rights protests, than with the hot wars against imperialism in the jungles of Bolivia, Vietnam, and Mozambique.

Third, the valorization of the lumpenproletariat was both counterintuitive and ultimately politically divisive. Popular film and television, and podium rhetoric, particularly among black nationalists, presented the American industrial working class as placated, bought off, and hostile to black progress, a depiction at odds with the actual history of the interwar Communist Popular Front and progressive labor's support for the fight against Jim Crow segregation. Moreover, if the labor unions and socialist tendencies of the middle twentieth century could not carry out revolution on U.S. soil, how might the most socially isolated and politically disempowered segment of the population succeed where more powerful forces had failed? Newton, Cleaver, and other defenders of the lumpenproletariat as the new vanguard were right in refocusing attention on the most dispossessed of America's inner-city ghettos. Their arguments, however, unwittingly reinscribed the prevailing Cold War liberal ideology that treated black urban poverty as a social anomaly within an otherwise sacrosanct liberal democratic capitalist order.

Although the focus on the lumpenproletariat carried an air of revolutionary ardor, the rhetorical and actual political threat posed by Black Power radicals helped to enhance the leverage of those more moderate leadership elements of the black ghetto, facilitating dynamics of integration and patronage that gave birth to a new black urban governing regime of politicians and policy bureaucrats. Most often, those who evoked the specter of ever more destructive forces revealed in urban rebellions facilitated a process of elite brokerage and movement containment, a path that led to more representation and services rather than the abolition of the powerful economic forces that produced unemployment, exploitation, and segregation in U.S. inner cities.

Confronting American Empire

Newton's most fruitful phase of intellectual activity lasted from his 1970 release from prison to 1972. This short historical window constituted the height of his political influence and popularity. The campaign to secure his release had made Newton an internationally recognized figure. He traveled extensively, lecturing at colleges and universities, appearing on television and radio broadcasts, and holding court with revolutionary figures such as the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, FRELIMO commander and Mozambican president Samora Moisés Machel, and Palestinian Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat. During these years Newton's most famous books were completed: *To Die for the People* (1972), a collection of his writings edited by Toni Morrison, and his autobiography, *Revolutionary Suicide* (1973). Newton would continue to write throughout the 1970s, but those later works, many of which were developed within the context of his graduate school education at Santa Cruz, were more narrowly focused and did not reach a wide audience.

During this short period, Newton not only offered a more full-bodied interpretation of technology and its emancipatory potential but also introduced the notion of "intercommunalism" as a way of understanding the new social geography of empire. Much of this material is speculative, both in the sense of being probing and critical and in being incomplete. What follows is not an endorsement of intercommunalism but an exploration of how his thinking evolved away from a focus on national liberation rooted in Third Worldism toward a popular democratic left politics tailored to the U.S. context.

Although Newton asserted immediately after his July 1970 release that "our program is armed struggle," he would quickly retreat from this open posturing toward urban guerrilla warfare. For a moment he focused on the unique terrain that Americans, not just blacks, faced and what it might take to build a counterpower capable of contesting ruling-class control over the economy and technology.

The actual achievement of moderate forms of black self-determination during the Nixon years, namely empowerment through increased black representation within formal government, private foundations, and corporations, had pushed many black radicals within the party and throughout the movement to reconsider the very notions of ethnic political constituency and shared black interests that had animated so many campaigns and programs since the mid-1960s. Yet Newton did not so much abandon black self-determination because of economic changes as offer a more expansive view of self-determination as the expropriation of production technology rather than the pursuit of national liberation in the traditional mode of seizing state power.

In one of his first public addresses following his 1970 release, Newton attempted to clarify the Panthers' program. In the speech, he analyzed the domestic contours of American empire and the social and economic implications of the technocratic society. Newton embarked on a brief argument concerning technological change and capitalist development, concluding that "automation will progress to cybernation, and cybernation probably to technocracy," a process that will swell the ranks of the unemployables, making the lumpenproletariat the popular majority. His speech anticipated some of the postindustrial socialist writings of French theorists like André Gorz and Serge Mallet, who contemplated the political implications of class decomposition under technological change and industrial restructuring, the most effective path for socialist politics in a world of conservative unionism and reactionary political parties, and the character that social life might take if humankind were emancipated from compulsory wage labor. It is within this context of creeping obsolescence that Newton justified the various community programs offered by the party, not as revolutionary but as survival programs.

In his neglected 1972 essay "The Technology Question," Newton warned that not only had technological change enhanced the power and reach of Western capitalists, but these changes also undermined older modes of politics, including land-based national liberation. He anticipated the enlarged role of finance capital and knowledge-oriented labor and commerce that would define the U.S. domestic and global economies during the remaining decades of his life. Changes in the means, rate, and volume of information flows, the extensive use of computer technology, and a corresponding logistics revolution in the production and distribution of commodities would all radically alter capital mobility and investment dynamics during the 1970s and 1980s. The integrity of nation-state sovereignty was transformed as well, with dire consequences for the leadership of newly created postcolonial regimes who hoped to spur national industrial development and modernization through statist interventions. National liberation under these new conditions was a hollow victory according to Newton, a symbolic achievement where the national bourgeoisie would "take the place of the colonizer" but under eroded conditions of state sovereignty.

Although communities in other parts of the world may be focused on the land question, Newton held that within the United States "it is the technology question, and the consumption of the goods that technology produces!" "We have difficulties selling a progressive political line to not only the hard hats but also to blacks. It is because the evil of the reactionary ruling circle is often hard to pinpoint," Newton continued. "It becomes more difficult when those people in the proletarian group, those who are fully employed, are happy just to have a job with a higher wage than anyplace in the world."

Perhaps as a result of his travels abroad, Newton began to think more critically about how all Americans are implicated in the reproduction of empire. He argued: "Even the average person, the average 'nigger' in the United States does not live as low as the average Chinese." The roots of mass quiescence within the United States lay not merely in consumer lifestyles, however, but in the broader Cold War patriotic culture that sustained the military industrial complex. Many citizens accepted American military adventurism because they benefited materially from empire. And yet, if marshaled under democratic control, scientific knowledge and new technology might resolve many

of the great problems that afflict humanity. "The same supercapitalists will be our supply sergeants. We will feed India, and all of Africa will spring up from one breadbasket," he wrote.

Newton offered the notion of intercommunalism as way of thinking about the novel landscape of American empire and the new forms of global solidarity that might be marshaled against imperialism. In February 1971, Newton offered his most in-depth statement of his thesis in an exchange with the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson. Newton's arguments anticipated many of the dynamics of market integration and corporate transnationalism within the contemporary political economy that we commonly summarize today as globalization. Although nations endured, American empire had rendered the concept politically obsolete.

The United States was no longer a nation-state, according to Newton; rather it was an empire, "a nation-state that has transformed itself into a power controlling all the world's land and people." Under these new deterritorialized conditions, Newton contended, "the people and the economy are so integrated into the imperialist empire that it's impossible to 'decolonize,' to return to the former conditions of existence." Rather than the nation or even the class, Newton emphasized the community as the most important form of social organization. He defined a community as "a small unit with a comprehensive collection of institutions that exist to serve a small group of people." Under American empire, the reactionary intercommunalism of a small "ruling circle" imposes its political and economic will on the planetary masses. For Newton, the antidote to this state of affairs was a "revolutionary intercommunalism," shared ownership of technology, and rational distribution of the earth's resources for the benefit of all.

Sadly, these writings and their critical and optimistic perspective on technology and socialism would soon be eclipsed by the changing historical tide. The provisional governments that had brought so much hope to people in the Third World and the West saw their forward motion arrested by counterinsurgencies and the imposition of neocolonial arrangements. Within the United States, some popular mobilizations of the 1960s achieved formal power and recognition, more militant organizations were weakened by police repression and infiltration, and many tendencies crashed and burned under their own internal contradictions. The Panthers continued on throughout the 1970s, but this was an extended period of decline. Politically, the organization made peace with systemic politics, and although it hoped to pursue radical aims through conventional means, this strategic shift bore little fruit.

Newton's personal life reflected the broader turmoil and decline of the age. Although he still answered to the title "Servant of the People," in party circles Newton took to being called "Supreme Commander," and his behavior was increasingly erratic. As the purges of the party cadre wore on, not even Newton's closest confidants, such as his childhood friend David Hilliard and party cofounder Bobby Seale, were spared. And in 1974 Newton fled to Cuba to evade criminal prosecution for pistol-whipping a tailor, Preston Callins, and for the murder of Kathleen Smith, a seventeen-year-old sex worker.

Few organizations from the Black Power era are as venerated as the Black Panther Party. Their courageous words and deeds have grown more radical as American life has become more conservative, and as the very social contradictions they attempted to address have expanded in scale and consequences. Their survival programs, armed patrols, popular education campaigns, and revolutionary aspirations continue to resonate in a context where urban poverty, police brutality, crime, and neoliberalism produce heartache within black working-class life and across U.S. society. The vindication of the Panthers in so much academic and popular remembrance, however, has bridled the kind of critical intellectual engagement that might sustain vibrant public debate over the past, present, and future of black political life. The Panthers were not plaster saints. They were flesh, blood, and spirit, a fact that makes what they were able to achieve against long odds all the

more remarkable. What is needed are analyses that take the Panthers seriously and assess the relative merits of their revolutionary politics.

There was a shard of truth in Roy Wilkins's charge that "revolutionaries get confused," a jagged and dangerous shard but one that must be handled with some care rather than merely brushed aside: as social analysis and political project, the colonial analogy was limited. But Newton's views on American empire evolved beyond it. The series of highly provocative writings and speeches on the emerging geography of American imperialism that he authored after his 1970 release from prison anticipated latter-day arguments regarding capitalist globalization, deterritorialized power, and diminished state sovereignty. He expanded his earlier arguments regarding the lumpenproletariat to address the implications of capital-intensive production for living labor. The lumpenproletariat within his emerging formulation was not a new vanguard but rather a portent of the precarious life that increasing swaths of the population might expect to endure under conditions of technological obsolescence. His view of technology, however, is not cynical but critical. It enabled American firms to conquer living labor and the earth's resources, but might also constitute a path to a freer existence for the greatest number of humanity. Newton's writings on intercommunalism and technology are provocative and constitute an important if incomplete contribution to radical left thinking in the late twentieth century.

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P.S.

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