Ferguson, the Black Radical Tradition and the Path Forward

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Can't you feel it? Feel the temperature dropping? Feel the icy winds blowing? It’s winter in America. Spring and fall seem to have enveloped summer. The chill comes sooner and lasts longer. It’s winter in America. There’s a blizzard coming. The first frost has already fallen, in Ferguson, Missouri, of all places. Ferguson has ripped the veil off. It is now clear for the world to see how the U.S. plans to deal with its black internal colony.

It’s getting dark; it’s nearly midnight. Yes, repressive episodes will continue to increase in frequency and grow in intensity. It’s nearly midnight. However, we should not despair. Enveloped in the darkness, the repressive U.S. regime of racial control has been exposed by the black light of African American youth rebellion and more importantly, through their defiance we can see the silhouette of a new era emerging. Don’t fear the dark. Dawn begins at midnight; midnight is “the first minute of a new day.”

I am of course referencing Gil Scott-Heron, the Black radical griot, second-generation political rapper (Langston Hughes and Oscar Brown Jr. first generation) and self-proclaimed “bluesician”. Our children are maturing in Ferguson; they are not only challenging the State, but as importantly, they are also defying the decrepit civil righters. A new movement is being born in the darkness of Ferguson, Missouri. The new reality, the new nadir has established the structural conditions for the birth of a new movement. We need to supply the consciousness. “Each generation must, out of relative obscurity,
discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it” according to Frantz Fanon (Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* New York: Grove Press, 1969, 206). Each generation creates new organizations, associations that address the problems they confront, that speak their language; that expresses their style and articulates their analysis and understanding of the path forward. The NAACP in the early 20th century, the National Negro Congress during the Great Depression, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the 1950s, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in the early 1960s, the Black Panther Party in the late 1960s, etc. This process of generational organizational formation appears to be occurring before our eyes. However, it is the dark of night, so we cannot see clearly, but however dimly, it does seem that in Ferguson, Missouri, Black generation Xers are discovering their mission.

Am I glorifying the looting, burning and indiscriminate shooting? No! Do I condemn it? Do white Americans condemn the actions of the Sons of Liberty? Do I condone it? I neither condemn nor condone it. I recognize it as an expression of working class African American youth, men and women, struggling to find their voice and discovering that actions speak louder than words. The Ferguson rebellion is an inchoate manifestation of the roiling turbulent dark water of African American resistance to white supremacy and capitalist exploitation. Will it become more? Will the young activists become politically conscious and organized? Will the youth whose dogged strength has kept the rebellion alive transform themselves into radicals and their struggle into a battle for power? It’s unclear; therefore, I don’t condemn it. It’s too soon to tell what it means in the flow history. However, professor Ashley Howard reminds us that what’s been called riots are merely the tactics of the most marginal and alienated sectors of Afro-
America. Ferguson is inspired by the same conditions and in embryonic form harkens back to Harlem 1935, Los Angeles 1965, Miami 1981 and Los Angeles 1992. At this point it is less destructive. Perhaps, it is a more organized manifestation of African American urban rebellion. Possibly, it signals the maturation of urban working class Black youth.

I know this seems like evasion. The reader is thinking, if you mean to defend it, just do so; stop playing liberal public intellectual word games. I assure you I am not. I don’t condone the looting, burning and shooting because it promotes anarchy, is a losing tactic, and does not flow from a coherent strategy for liberation. However, like it or not, what’s called crime is generally not a question of morality, but rather a question of political economy. As Karl Marx argued, “crime” is often the first confused gestures of an oppressed class or people repudiating the legitimacy of the status quo and creeping toward a more profound resistance. My opposition to looting, burning and indiscriminate shooting is political, not simply moral. My concern is with preserving the lives and health of African Americans and our allies, not with protecting the property of the most predatory sectors of capital--convenience stores, payday lenders, and retail merchants. Despite its contradictions, in the darkness of night in Ferguson, Missouri, a new Black liberation movement may be emerging.

Shattering Liberal Myths

However contradictory and confused the actions of working class Black youth in Ferguson are exposing a number of myths.

Myth 1: Reconciliation. The myth of racial reconciliation is promoted by African
American liberals but has its origins in distractions the African National Congress foisted upon the black South African masses to hide their betrayal to global capitalism. We don’t need racial reconciliation, what we need is the transfer of power and a redistribution of wealth and resources, in a word reparations. The only “conversation on race” that’s worth having, is a discussion about reparations, why, how and when!

Myth 2: Electoral politics. Ferguson is 67 percent African American, 14,297 Blacks live there out of a population of 21,203, yet only one of five city council persons and none of the seven school board members are Black. Appallingly only 12 percent of the population voted in the last election. The town seems ripe for black liberal ethnic pluralist politics. However, there is this hard knot of an inconvenient fact. African Americans’ role in the economy, status in civil society, position in the polity, and representation in the culture has stagnated or regressed at precisely the same moment as the number of Black elected officials has grown to record numbers. Unlike the 1970s and early ‘80s Black elected officials can no longer be depended upon to raise issues of police brutality (http://www.theroot.com/articles/politics/2014/08/ferguson_what_are_black_politicians_doing.html?wpsrc=slipad). This contradiction should disabuse those presenting ethnic pluralist electoral politics as a panacea.

Myth 3: Diversification of the police force. Ferguson has 56 police officers of which only three are Black. This is perhaps more disproportionate than most places but in the U.S. police rarely resemble the people they harass and repress. Moreover, to the extent that African Americans have been incorporated into police forces, in the main the minority of Black officers have “blued” and not in the sense of the blues aesthetic. With notable exceptions, they have adapted and adopted “the blue,” rather than become change
agents within its midst.

**The Path Forward: What is to be Done**

I don’t address the immediate local demands, the Organization for Black Struggle and the Hands Up, Don’t Shoot Coalition have adequately addressed this question ([http://obs-onthemove.org/featured/end-the-racist-police-state-in-ferguson-misery-2/](http://obs-onthemove.org/featured/end-the-racist-police-state-in-ferguson-misery-2/)). Here I address more longer-term movement building and transformative policy goals.

1. **Organization.** Whether they form something new, the Hands Up, Don’t Shoot Coalition, the Million Hoodies Movement or flow into and revitalize an existing organization, the youth must organize. In truth, with few exceptions, the Organization for Black Struggle ([http://obs-onthemove.org](http://obs-onthemove.org)) and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement ([http://mxgm.org](http://mxgm.org)) for instance, it is better that they continue to create new generational organizations as they have been doing.

2. **The Black majority of Ferguson must take political power.** However, it’s important they not repeat the errors of the past. They need to break with ethnic group pluralism (the idea that through political unity African Americans can acquire comparable power to that of white ethnic groups without changing the United States’ political economy) and liberal individualism (a system based on individual civil rights) and explicitly organize around a position of *group rights*, fight for a *consociational* state (racial/ethnic group power sharing) in which African Americans organize for self-determination, participatory democracy, and economic
justice. The goal should be to acquire “dual power,” to build a sustainable liberation movement whereby African Americans can make political decisions for themselves, locally and nationally, while simultaneously electing progressive Black and nonblack candidates to local, state and national office. The Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, its former leader, Chokwe Lumumba, the late mayor of Jackson and the Jackson Peoples Assembly have put forward the Jackson Plan as a model for “participatory democracy, solidarity economy, and sustainable development and combine them with progressive community organizing and electoral politics” http://mxgm.org/the-jackson-plan-a-struggle-for-self-determination-participatory-democracy-and-economic-justice/.

3. Ferguson Blacks must take control of the local police. Not only do the police not look like Ferguson’s majority population but they also don’t reside in Ferguson.
   a. A civilian review board with subpoena power should be instituted immediately.
   b. There must be a local residency requirement for municipal employment.
   c. All new hires on the Ferguson police force should be African American until the disparity is corrected.

4. Police should be treated similar to private citizens:
   a. Police officers involved in a shooting or a confrontation in which a
citizen is harmed should be tested immediately for drug usage.

b. Police officers involved in a shooting should be suspended without pay until the shooting is ruled justifiable. The union should support officer’s accused of using excessive and/or deadly force until a formal ruling is rendered.

c. An officer that observes misconduct and/or the use of excessive force and doesn’t act to prevent or stop it should be charged along with the offending officer.


Conclusion

It’s winter in America. The very prescient Lou Turner warns that the U.S. corporate capitalist are enacting a coup, through the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEX) and U.S. Supreme Court, they are steadily eliminating democratic rights

These are dark times. It is nearly midnight. In a somewhat similar situation, the 1935 Harlem Rebellion, Langston Hughes wrote “Shepherds over Harlem/Their armed watch keep/Lest Harlem stirs in its sleep/And maybe remembers/And remembering forgets/To be peaceful and quiet.” Black youth are stirring. In Ferguson, Missouri, a new generation has awakened and they are LOUD AND DEFIANT! “Midnight is the first minute of a New Day.”