

Panther Power, Dual Power?

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Forthcoming in *Against the Current*, as part of a roundtable on *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution* (dir. Stanley Nelson, 2016).

Everyone knows that today the police need policing more than ever. Watching *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution* in 2016, one is stunned by the extraordinary brutality, not only of the 1960s, but of today. I find it hard to imagine the Black Panthers in the heyday of 1967-70, even in their most pessimistic moods, foreseeing a future as dismal as our present. Did they dream this dystopia—this hopelessness after the revolution—even at the end, after the murders and the F.B.I., the drugs and the great betrayals? The roll call of African Americans slaughtered by the police—I write this in July 2016—appears as the endlessly unfolding obscene truth of the United States.

Viewing the film under the pressure of its title, then, one is struck first by what appears to be the failure of the vanguard, if not of the revolution itself. In the wake of that initial melancholy comes a flood of questions to be posed back to the film, to the Panthers, and to our current history—too many questions to consider in this short space, so I will dwell briefly on just two of the many that seem to me to coordinate with our conjuncture and to chart some path ahead. My response is partial and limited, necessarily, and I offer it as a modest contribution to current conversations. Mine are the questions of (to use two languages that may seem out of tune with today's general discourse) dual power, on the one hand, and spectacle, on the other. Or, to put it another way, my responses have to do with the problem of *organizing*, and of sustaining the legitimacy of revolutionary movements that pose real alternatives to state and economy, under conditions of late-capitalist (or, if you prefer, neoliberal or globalized) *image saturation*.

It's not wrong, I think, to see the two questions as a unity in the history of the Party. The Panthers' first, formative policing-the-police outings were organized as a self-defense tactic. Strategically, however, they served an unexpected double purpose. First, they attracted cadres. It was clear from the start that the Party would provide real support: protection from the cops, yes, but also a mode of sociality and sustenance (never just a matter of so-called "survival" programs) that energized a generation. Second, those early appearances with the guns (especially the occupation of the California State Capitol in May 1967) established the image of a new collective actor, well beyond the core cities themselves. If the Black Panther avatar was often something of a pose for the cameras and the pious white philanthropists ("That's the image that was put upon us," Wayne Pharr says, near the end of *Vanguard of the Revolution*), it

nevertheless was based on the truth of the organization. That truth was black power, grounded in the guns, the books, and (as Phyllis Jackson and Elaine Brown underscore in the film) the rejection of the racist capitalism that was already entering a new phase of retrenchment (the Long Downturn, in Robert Brenner’s phrase) that would gut the great black cities that took shape during the Second Great Migration of midcentury. Perhaps as much as anything else, the Party made black America visible *en masse* within the media spectacle of the late 60s. White terror in the heartland was counterpointed by black exuberance everywhere. Rita Williams-Garcia speaks of the wholesale reorientation here: no longer was everything a performance for a racist white observer. One of the film’s early montage sequences conveys the excitement of the Panthers’ *style* as a fresh point of black pride. (A young Kathleen Cleaver smiles in stock footage: “Dig it? Isn’t it beautiful? Alright.”)

So the Party were always deft manipulators of the capitalist image-world, striking poses that would stifle police violence even as they recruited members. Within a short period, famously, the Panthers had established their breakfast program (20,000 children per week in 19 cities), in addition to a slew of social-resource operations. In 1969, the New Haven Black Panthers were feeding six dozen children every morning, teaching revolutionary ideology in evening courses, distributing free clothing, and supporting a neighborhood lead-abatement project.¹ Huey Newton would eventually refer to this kind of work as the Panthers’ “survival programs,” and *Vanguard of the Revolution* thoroughly (if somewhat too eagerly) documents the split between Newton and David Hilliard’s focus on “survival programs” after Newton’s release in 1970 and the Cleaver faction’s rhetorical turn to an ultra-left insistence on revolution alone. As Kathleen Cleaver puts it, speaking directly to the filmmakers, the “vehicle for social service” was pitted against the “vehicle for revolution.” Eldridge Cleaver himself stated that the Black Panther Party was “not a breakfast-for-children program. ... The Black Panther Party is for overthrowing the United States government.” But of course the pseudo-political conflict between these two brilliant but increasingly irresponsible “maniacs” (to use Landon Williams’s term, repeated in the film) misses the point, and it obscures the Party’s great achievement.² For, as the film makes clear, the Panthers are maybe best understood as a revolutionary organization that delegitimized the state by

¹ See Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 254 and *passim*. The voter-registration drive behind Bobby Seale’s campaign for mayor of Oakland indicates the organizing power of the Panthers (up to 40,000 black voters registered), even as it symptomatizes the end of the Party as such, its reversion to “a local Oakland organization” (Bloom and Martin, 381).

² Donna Murch says that Newton himself had become, by the time of his release, “an image, not a man.”

establishing an alternative to it within the black cities. The programs built legitimacy and political efficacy, and they bolstered membership rolls. Any movement needs to prove, practically, that it matters, that it is worth commitment. Those cadres who joined because of the image-work stayed because of the dual-power programs, as Elaine Brown, among others, insists throughout *Vanguard of the Revolution*.

That original marriage of spectacular image-politics with properly supportive community work remains the Panthers' signature. The effect is palpable still, in the residual—reemerging—black power commitment across the country. At the same time, the Long Downturn's viciousness has routed those same locales, leaving in its wake a spirit, yes, but something less than Panther (dual) Power: the para-state apparatuses of community support, stretching from the churches to movements like Uhuru, are at best (and perhaps by definition) on their back foot. As for the broader Left, it is evident that community programs of the Panther dual-power sort have withered, although of course the practical work continues in a multitude of forms (as in, for example, the crucial successes of eviction resistance in cities like Detroit).

What then are the prospects for a return to the unity of image-work and dual power? Are we to see the flicker of the 60s as just that, a last light before the long darkness? Black Lives Matter is the obvious high point of today's political movements within the U.S. Its policing of the police is based on manipulation of the spectacle: the smartphone is its great weapon, turned against both the police, who would commit their crimes away from the public view, and the image-masters who would have us stare permanently into the screen, breaking only to fulfill an Amazon order or buy another app.

At the same time, *Vanguard of the Revolution* points up two contemporary challenges in relation to my two axes of power. On the one hand, if image-manipulation—a real *politics* of the image—is BLM's strength, the movement hasn't (and perhaps it can't, in its current form) extended itself toward social programs beyond self-defense. That very lack may be one reason for its near hegemony today (outside of the white reactionary enclaves): the minimal claim that black lives matter is impossible to deny, and the grotesquerie of racist policy is patently outrageous.

On the other hand, the spectacle as such may have transformed so much since the 60s—when the first diagnosis of its force was produced by Guy Debord and his comrades in Europe—that resistance *within* it may be harder than ever. That is, given today's image totality, there is no evident location beyond or outside the spectacle, a circumstance that the Panthers intuited. Certainly the old-fashioned “real” politics of dual power sounds antiquated.³ And the state and its police still seem one step ahead.

³ Though on this matter, Fredric Jameson's recent lecture on dual power and the utopian imagination—now a book—offers fresh and productive thinking on all of these fronts. See Fredric Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*,

So far the spectacular exposure of police violence has organized resistance without reducing that violence. (Indeed, as a number of news sources reported after the shootings in Dallas, during the past several years the police, not the citizens, have been safer than in recent memory.) The Debordian tradition within Marxism has outlined the intimacy of spectacle and the excessive violence of the state. *Vanguard of the Revolution* reminds us that the SWAT program was born as a weapon against the Black Panther Party, tested in the LAPD's assault on the L.A. Panthers' headquarters in 1969.⁴ In 2016, as the Dallas police confronted Micah Johnson, they killed their would-be assassin using a bomb-carrying robot. That last, unprecedented militarization of racist policing, like the SWAT innovation before it, suggests that the development in police power is indexed to the racist assault on black power in its myriad forms. The spectacular violence of the SWAT teams—a counterrevolutionary force celebrated on cinema and television screens since the 60s—has been superseded by police who can kill, drone-style, using screens of their own. Now more than ever, under these conditions of renewed assault, we should welcome the legacy of the Panthers, who give us (once more) some tools to organize both grassroots forces and an image repertoire for confronting a familiar enemy in new form.

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⁴ For a provocative and exceptionally useful theorization of the insurrections of the late 60s in terms of deindustrialization, police militarization, and racialization, see Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot* (London: Verso, 2016), especially chapter 8, "Surplus Rebellions".