



Huey Newton's Lessons for the Academic Left

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Abstract

The Black Panther Party was founded to bridge the radical theorizing that swept college campuses in the mid-1960s and the lumpen proletariat abandoned by the so-called 'Great Society'. However, shortly thereafter, Newton began to harshly criticize the academic Left in general for their drive to find 'a set of actions and a set of principles that are easy to identify and are absolute.' This article reconstructs Newton's critique of progressive movements grounded primarily in academic debates, as well as his conception of vanguard political theory. Newton's grasp of revolution as a gradual, open, and above all dialectical process, not only provides a corrective to many dominant academic accounts of the nature of progressive change but, more importantly, it also grounds an emancipatory philosophy that can direct collective struggle, precisely because it remains grounded in the imperfect and internally conflicted lives of those whose freedom is to be won through it.

Keywords

Black Panthers, emancipation, Huey Newton, intercommunalism, vanguard theory

Introduction

Having first worked together in the Soul Students Advisory Council at Merritt College, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton founded the Black Panther Party (BPP) in part to connect the radical theorizing that guided the student movements of the 1960s with the lumpen proletariat abandoned by the core institutions of civil society. Their initial goal was thus to 'draw... strength from the university on the one hand, while... organizing the grassroots in the community on the other' (Shames and Seale, 2016: 32). Much of their early recruitment accordingly took place on and around college campuses, and the BPP's political education classes featured many of the same texts broadly consumed by the era's student radicals. However, Newton also insisted that the BPP 'wasn't a college campus organization' (Hilliard and Weise, 2002: 216) because its practices were also formed out of an evolving and trenchant critique of

the academic Left, as exemplified to him by the cultural nationalism then ascendant in many black student unions and the internationalist socialism that prevailed in predominantly white student groups. In this article, I examine Newton's critiques of these movements in order to reconstruct his account of the nature and role of genuinely vanguard political theory; I close with some speculative comments on their enduring relevance for contemporary debates concerning intellectual leadership on the Left.

Newton's Critique of Black Cultural Nationalism

Initially, Newton investigated several nationalist student organizations, where he learned 'that it was rational and logical . . . to believe that our sufferings as a people would end when we established a nation of our own' (Newton et al., 2004: 29). Practically, he took this to mean that 'Black people must now move, from the grassroots up through the perfumed circles of the . . . Bourgeoisie, to seize by any means necessary a proportionate share of the power vested and collected in the structure of America' (quoted in Hayes and Kiene, 1998: 163), echoing the rhetoric of campus nationalists like the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM); however, the BPP was founded and began its legendary armed police patrols to 'move [nationalism] beyond [its] own rhetoric' into concrete action (Hilliard, 2006: 16). Thus, while he always affirmed that 'one's skin color affected how one approached the world' (Anderson, 2012: 252), Newton's call to move from rhetoric to action, along with his sideways shot at the black elite, indicates that 'from the beginning [he] found it difficult to accept' the homogenizing, cultural forms of nationalism then dominant on campus (Newton et al., 2004: 49).

For example, during his involvement with the Afro-American Association, he dutifully worked, as he put it, 'to develop an attitude of great hatred for . . . white people . . . because all of them had received some privileges from the fact their foreparents had been robbers and rapists'; however, he would also 'feel a certain guilt' if he failed to 'do courteous things such as opening a door for a woman who happened to be white'. This personal conflict was transformed into a political conviction by the hostile reactions of his newfound comrades to such minor transgressions (Newton, Lenin, and Gdala, 2004: 49). Throughout his nationalist period, he claims, 'every time I thought I had that attitude all developed and internalized, my comrades would call me on the carpet about something [and] I would be criticized', as when RAM refused him membership because his parents' (Newton, Lenin, and Gdala, 2004: 49) house was located too close to the gentrified Oakland Hills neighbourhood (see Seale, 1991: 24–25; Newton, 2009: 72–73). Given the relative insignificance of his transgressions, these harsh and remarkably personal rebukes struck Newton as reflecting less an interest in collective liberation than a drive for individual power, which on campus seemed best

achieved by calling out the moral or political failings of others; and Newton's own experiences showed him that this tactic was more readily and frequently directed against would-be allies than it was against genuine oppressors.

Of course, Newton also held that cultural nationalism was an understandable 'reaction' to cultural oppression, effectively marking the defensive inversion of white supremacy's binary categories of 'good' and 'evil' (Newton, 1970: 50); *qua* reaction, however, this inverse binary tended towards a wholesale rejection of the society that suppressed black life, in favor of a presumed 'culture which is either pre-slavery [or] pre-colonialistic' (Harrison, 1970: 151). That is, because he saw nationalism as essentially reactive, Newton held that it would inevitably be grounded less in an historically accurate set of African values than in a need to invert or oppose those identified with imperial Europe; as such, he provocatively argues, its cultural claims could just as well 'have been made up' (p. 153).

But what troubled Newton more than the potential inaccuracy of its historical claims was the fact that cultural nationalism opened up the possibility of placing a kind of arbitrary authority in the hands of those who – by positing those values and/or by identifying themselves with them – could assert their right to instruct not only whites as to what reforms needed to be brought to educational and cultural institutions, but blacks as to what their 'proper' values and interests should be. Newton thus argued that cultural nationalism 'often degenerated into a vulgar cultural elitism' (Anderson, 2012: 252) that not only led many to reject the sciences, philosophies, cultural tools, and potential allies that he saw as essential resources for black liberation, but more importantly tended towards the creation of a self-appointed caste of intellectual and political elites who would claim to *speak on behalf of* oppressed communities, rather than facilitating their collective self-determination.

Thus, while he always affirmed 'that it was important that blacks are made aware of their political and cultural heritage in order to move forward as a people' (Jeffries, 2002: 56), Newton became convinced that what his community needed was a genuine 'people's revolution with the goal being the people in power' to further their own collectively determined interests (Newton, 1970: 50); and because he saw the movement as arising in order to 'give power to people who have not had any power to determine their destiny', Newton quickly came to hold that 'Black Power is really people's power' in general (p. 61). As he debated with nationalists during his student days, he recalled:

When I presented my solution to the problems of Black people... people said, 'Well, isn't that socialism?' Some of them were using the socialist label to put me down, but I figured that if this was socialism, then socialism must be a correct view. So I read more

of the socialists and began to see a strong similarity between my beliefs and theirs. (p. 70)

Consequently, he began to re-organize the BPP around his new understanding that the 'most legitimate way to guarantee mass rights today... is not struggling for civil rights' for black communities in particular, but fighting 'to restructure the system [as a whole] along socialist lines' (McCartney, 1992: 145).

Newton's Critique of White Socialist Internationalism

This shift brought him into contact with campus-centred Leftist groups like the Peace and Freedom Party (PFP), Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the Progressive Labor Party (PLP), with whom he sought to build a broader socialist front; however, his efforts at coalition building with these largely white organizations¹ quickly served to deepen his suspicions regarding the purportedly radical theorizing of college activists. Because what he called the 'white mother country radical [on campus typically] doesn't have to live in [the] reality of oppression', Newton found the rhetoric and analysis among campus socialists was even further removed from the complexity of social reality than that of the cultural nationalists (Newton, 1970: 52). The PLP, for example, echoed Newton's critique of nationalism, but only to argue that 'black people could attain their liberation only as part of the united working class under the leadership of that class's Marxist vanguard organization'; thus, they not only completely 'subordinated race to class', but *nominated themselves* as the intellectuals most qualified to speak on black struggle (Barber, 2006: 231). For Newton, this quite simply meant: 'there was nothing happening there, just a lot of talk and dogmatism, unrelated to the world I knew' (Newton, 2009: 70). Conversely, SDS preferred the early, nationalist rhetoric of the BPP, but where Newton 'always held the position that white people should [primarily] work to end racism in their own community' (Seale, 1991: 208), their leadership similarly 'repeatedly sought to school the Panthers in the meaning, strategy, and tactics of black liberation and revolution' because they 'assumed that [their education gave them] a superior vision of social change and [thus] that they would take the lead in bringing about that change' (Barber, 2006: 225); for example, when Newton and Seale called on white radicals to work in their own neighbourhoods to implement community oversight boards for local police forces, SDS leadership rejected the request, claiming 'white community control of the police deflected the issues of fascism, racism, and self-determination by creating a "parity" between communities that, because of white supremacy, were not equal' (p. 236). The same refusal was made by PFP, who preferred to focus on the celebrated 'Free Huey' campaign, without understanding that 'Huey's situation was

inseparable from the needs of the community' as a whole (Seale, 1991: 210). More tellingly, when the SDS passed a resolution in support of the BPP's 10-Point program in 1969, they simultaneously insisted – over the objections of Panther leadership – on highlighting the central importance of the underground and highly contested Black Liberation Army, thus 'emphasizing the Panthers' military program just as the Panthers themselves were deemphasizing the program [to] strengthen... their community-organizing' efforts, which had been far more successful in recruiting, educating, and mobilizing their base (Barber, 2006: 232). In fact, even as the white student radicals fragmented into mutually opposed factions, many agreed with the SDS offshoot Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM)'s claim that 'smashing the illusion of reform [should be the] priority in the building of a revolutionary anti-imperialist movement'.² By contrast, because the BPP was primarily 'interested in the people', they wanted more than anything to 'serve the people' rather than instruct them, and thus they frequently developed and promoted seemingly 'reformist kinds of programs' like the Free Breakfast, Free Health Clinic, and prison visitation programs that they saw as essential for building a broader 'revolutionary agenda' grounded in the immediate and expressed materialist interests of the people (Newton et al, 2004: 72); and while these programs were both popular with, materially supported by, and life-enhancing for the communities they served, their reformist appearance nevertheless increased their conflicts with white student militants, thus pushing the Panthers even further from campus.³

The Temptations of the Academic Left

In short, Newton and Seale found that their 'hook-up with white radicals did not give [them] access to the white community because they did not guide the white community' outside the university (Newton and Morrison, 2009: 51), just as they had 'problems with black students sometimes because they tend to have a detached understanding of the realities in the black community' off campus (Seale, 1991: 211). Their continual and withering critique of 'intellectual jivers... who sit in a fucking armchair and try to articulate the revolution while black people are dying in the streets' at times appears as a standard call by grassroots activists to place the pressing needs of concrete praxis before the leisurely pursuit of abstract theory (Seale, 1991: 119, 33); and, indeed, Newton claims 'when Bobby and I left Merritt College to organize brothers on the block we did so because the college students were too content to sit around and analyze without acting' (Newton and Morrison, 2009: 99). However, Newton was far from opposed to even highly speculative theorizing; he would, after all, routinely open talks by asking his audience 'to assume that an external world exists' before they could proceed (Hilliard and Weise, 2002: 162).⁴ His disillusionment with academic

activists was not due to the complexity or abstraction necessary for theoretical debate; on the contrary, it was grounded in his experience that ‘when I speak on college campuses... I try to lead an audience into rational and logical discussions, but many students are looking for rhetoric and phrasemongering’ instead, which he felt indicated in his audiences not only an evasion of potentially valid, and thus needed, criticism of their own views, but an implicit elitism concerning off-campus participants in political discourse; as he put it, the students ‘either do not want to learn or they do not believe that I can think’ (Newton, 2009: 68).

Of course, Newton agreed with the white mother country radicals that the fight for black liberation was ‘in essence... not at all a race struggle [but a] struggle between the massive proletarian working class and the small, minority ruling class’ (Seale, 1991: 72); simultaneously, because that class remained internally divided by race and racism, he also held that ‘nationalism is recognized by many who think in a revolutionary manner as a distinct and natural stage through which one proceeds’, explaining, among other things, the Party’s anti-integrationist stance (Harrison, 1970: 151). He thus affirmed the necessity of developing a discourse that would ‘not only... make Blacks more proud but... make whites question and even reject concepts they had always unthinkingly accepted’ (Newton, 2009: 175), which required synthesizing race- and class-based theories of the numerous contradictions that structured social life. His experience with campus radicals, however, led him to believe that their goal, by contrast, was to find ‘a set of actions and a set of principles that are easy to identify and are absolute’ (Newton et al., 2004: 84), which not only deepened the distance between progressive theorists and those most in need of emancipatory thought, but encouraged those in elite positions *to instruct*, rather than *to engage with and listen to*, those in whose name they purportedly spoke. For Newton, to ‘attempt to explain phenomena... by taking [them] out of [their concrete] environment, [and] putting them into a category... without understanding everything else related to them’ was to ‘transform’ material, lived realities into reified abstractions that inevitably produced forms of praxis that imposed demands for an impossible ideological purity on a suffering populace living in a nest of economic, biological, psychological, and social contradictions (Hilliard and Weise, 2002: 163). This is why Newton ‘tried not to speak in such absolute... terms’ and emphasized the need for theorists to ‘analyse each instance’, rather than subsuming them under an abstract and rigid model treated as ‘an infallible guide in all cases’ (Newton et al., 2004: 26); as his thinking developed, he increasingly cautioned against theorizing that ‘does not apply to the present set of conditions [because it is] tied to a set of thoughts that approaches dogma – what we call flunkeyism’ (Hilliard and Weise, 2002: 165).

In fact, while it may seem counterintuitive given the militant positions the Panthers routinely struck in public, for Newton, the tendency among activists emerging from the academy to rigidly ‘draw...the line of demarcation, saying you are on this side and I am on the other... shows a lack of consciousness’ of the situation to be theorized (Newton, 2009: 62); not least because it is grounded in the same sort of absolute distinction between the ‘good’ human beings, cultures, and values and their ‘evil’ inversion or absence that defined the colonial mindset that black power and socialist internationalism were each formed to oppose. He reminds us that:

The African gods south of the Sahara always had at least two heads, one for good and one for evil. Now people make gods in their own image... So the African said, in effect, I am both good and evil; good and evil are the two parts of the thing that is me. This is an example of an internal contradiction.

Western societies split up good and evil, placing God up in heaven and the devil down below. Good and evil fight for control over people in Western religions, but they are two entirely different entities. (Newton et al., 2004: 24)

While the Manichean politics he encountered from both white and black campus-based activists resonates strongly with the struggle of the Good to control, instruct, or conquer the Evil, Newton’s own theorizing was based on the recognition ‘that all things are in a constant state of change, transformation, or flux’ (Hilliard and Weise, 2002: 163), because of ‘the internal contradictions in all things’, including the people themselves (Newton et al., 2004: 108). It is precisely for this reason that Newton, above all, endorses a *dialectical*⁵ understanding of social change:

This struggle of mutually exclusive opposing tendencies within everything that exists explains the observable fact that all things...are in a constant state of transformation. Things transform themselves because while one tendency or force is more dominating than another, change is nonetheless a constant, and at some point the balance will alter and there will be a new qualitative development... Now, because things do not stay the same we can be sure of one thing: the owner will not stay the owner, and the people who are dominated will not stay dominated. We don’t know exactly how this will happen, but...we can be sure that if we increase the intensity of the struggle (which is already underway), we will reach a point where the equilibrium of forces will change

and there will be a qualitative leap into a new situation with a new social equilibrium. (pp. 25–26)

Thus, above all, what Newton wanted to teach the academic-led Left, is that a genuine vanguard does not reprovably instruct the people as to what they should will, how they should struggle, or what their personal shortcomings are in the light of externally developed, inflexible, and absolute models or principles; it must proceed, rather, from a ‘great compassion for people’ (Newton et al., 2004: 54), or an understanding of, and empathy with, their inherently conflicted lives and communities. As he puts it, ‘the Black Panther Party is not based upon hate. We feel that [a] revolutionary program must be guided by a feeling of love—armed love we sometimes call it’, premised upon the ‘involvement and acceptance’ of the people not only at every stage, but more importantly ‘as they are’ in their flawed, internally contradictory state (Newton et al., 2004: 50). It is thus as much, and perhaps even more, the academic Left as the administrative Right that Newton has in mind when he laments that:

I don’t think students are taught dialectically, and one of the reasons they are not is that it would be detrimental to the bourgeois educational system to do so. I think that it is a fair statement to say that the schools are agencies of the status quo: . . . it would be detrimental to them to give students the tools to show [the people] that the status quo cannot stand and [thus] to analyze them out of existence. (Newton et al., 2004: 87)

Thus, while affirming the need for radical thought to emerge from spaces like the university, which can help clarify and guide the people in their ongoing efforts to resolve the contradictions of their lives, he simultaneously and strenuously warns that when radical theorists distance themselves from the community and begin to traffic in moral and political absolutes, they can easily slip into what he called ‘revolutionary cultism’; a temptation into which he admits he fell at various points in the Party’s development.

The revolutionary cultist uses the words of social change . . . but his actions are so far divorced from the process of revolution and organizing the community that he is living in a fantasy world. So we talk to each other on campuses . . . thinking these things will produce change without the people themselves. Of course people do courageous things and call themselves the vanguard, but . . . vanguard means spearhead, and the spearhead has to spearhead something.

If nothing is behind it, then it is divorced from the masses and is not the vanguard. (Newton and Morrison, 2009: 70–71)⁶

What was required, then, was not so much an emphasis on praxis over theory, but a specifically dialectical mode of synthesizing theory and practice that ‘emphasizes a concrete analysis of conditions’ within actual communities and which might help lay the foundation for ‘an appropriate response to these conditions as a way of mobilizing the people and leading them to higher levels of consciousness’ (Newton and Morrison, 2009: 49). As he puts it toward the end of his statement expelling Eldridge Cleaver from the Party for

influencing us to isolate ourselves from the Black community so that it was war between the oppressor and the Black Panther Party, not war between the oppressor and the oppressed community... Our dialectical ideology and our analysis of concrete conditions indicate that declaring a spontaneous revolution is a fantasy. The people are not at that point now. This contradiction and conflict may seem unfortunate to some, but it is part of the dialectical process. (pp. 51, 53)

For Newton, the structural oppression that communities endure necessitates *both* that the people are driven to resist and transform their suppressed circumstances (which we can call their ‘good’) *and* that ‘the opinions of the people have... been molded and directed against their true interests by slick politicians and *exploitative educators* [whose] diversion tactics often lead the people down blind alleys or onto tangents that take them away from their true goals’ (which thus reflects their ‘evil’) (p. 57, emphasis added); and it is these internally contradictory people – not reified abstractions of them – whose situation requires concrete analysis and to whom this theorizing must ultimately be directed. This, of course, retains radical theory’s traditional goal of providing a compelling critique of the structures which have distorted the lives and opinions of the people; but such critiques can only be both accurate to the community at issue, and more importantly relevant to emancipatory praxis, if they simultaneously *learn from the people* so as not to impose upon them externally developed, inflexibly applied, and thus *elite* demands, leaving them prey to organizing by reactionary leaders who speak more directly to their flawed lives and immediate needs.

Newton’s Conception of a Theoretical Vanguard

Vanguard theory, Newton argues, must therefore proceed from the recognition that ‘*revolution is a process*’ (Newton and Morrison, 2009: 57, emphasis in original), one which unfolds progressively over an extended

period of time as the people themselves come to increasingly identify and struggle for their true interests. Theorists, he therefore argued, can offer essential aid in guiding this process of collective self-determination, but in order to do so, they '*cannot offer the people conclusions*' (Newton and Morrison, 2009: 57, emphasis added) regarding the utopian state to be achieved, the form of subjectivity, culture, or contribution required to pursue it, or the absolute principles upon which progressive change rests, for 'when the revolutionary begins to indulge in . . . final conclusions, the people do not relate to him. Therefore he is no longer a revolutionary' (p. 47); because the 'only time an action is revolutionary is when the people relate to it in a revolutionary way', theorists 'must be ready to respond creatively to new conditions and new understandings' that emerge from the people themselves as they progressively struggle to determine their own destiny (pp. 48, 57).

Theorizing thus remains necessary because revolutionary struggle requires the critical determination and articulation of the contradictions that dominate social relations, as well as the development of speculative forms of praxis directed at their resolution; but Newton reminds us that 'these contradictions should be resolved in the community', rather than by purported experts or representatives, for only this makes social change genuinely progressive by grounding it in the actualized will of the people (Newton et al., 2004: 47). Thus as it 'tries to show the people the way to resolve these problems . . . the vanguard has to include all the people', and the people as internally contradictory, in both their theoretical analysis and practical recommendations. Because, as he laments, 'it will take time to resolve the contradictions of racism and all kinds of chauvinism' (p. 33), and because only the people themselves can genuinely resolve them, Newton believed the vanguard's essential task was to determine, articulate, and help build political programs that 'increase the positive qualities [or 'good'] in the people 'until they dominate the negative [or 'evil'] and therefore transform the situation' (Newton and Morrison, 2009: 101).

Of course, because the people are not only externally manipulated, but internally enmeshed in varied contradictions, those working to determine these programs often benefit from a partial remove from the circumstances they seek to study. While the university is not the only institution that can fulfil the role, spaces like it, where speculative thought, grounded in even quite esoteric research, can be both developed and forwarded for vigorous and rigorous debate, are needed so that a vanguard thought – one ahead of the people in its vision and thus which may help intensify and further the people's struggle for their own liberation – can be developed. Thus, what we typically (perhaps crudely) call 'critical theory' is perennially required because, as Newton puts it, if there is no-one to 'make the people aware of the tools and methods of liberation, there will be no means by which the people can mobilize' for their interests (Newton and Morrison, 2009: 15); however, such critical theorizing will

only be 'accepted as valid' by its ultimate target if it not only 'delivers a true understanding of the phenomena which affect the lives of the people', but moreover reflects and nurtures what *the people as they currently are, are currently willing to contribute* to the practical resolution of social contradictions; only this marks a truly vanguard thinking, or what Newton calls a 'philosophy which will help orient us toward goals which are in the true interests of the people' (pp. 58–59).

One might say, then, that what Newton is suggesting is that 'critical theory' is in fact better understood as a collection of competing hypotheses concerning both the contradictions that determine social life and the modes of their redress. As in empirical science, such hypotheses are developed out of limited evidence, and thus are often highly speculative or diverge in sharply contrasting ways, and before confirmation have the tendency of forming into competing, sometimes quite rigid and dogmatic schools of thought; consequently, these hypotheses, much like scientific ones, can only really become theories by testing them against the relevant data set, which in the case of revolutionary or emancipatory thought can only be the people themselves, who will decide whether it reflects or guides their struggle to collectively determine their own interests by mobilizing themselves to transform their immediately lived situation. While he does not quite put things this bluntly, this is one way of grasping the following passage from his famous speech on BPP ideology delivered to students at Boston College:

I would like to give you a framework or a process of thinking that might help us solve the problems and the contradictions that exist today. Before we approach the problem we must get a clear picture of what is really going on; a clear image divorced from the attitudes and emotions that we usually project into a situation. We must be as objective as possible without accepting dogma, letting the facts speak for themselves. But we will not remain totally objective; we will become subjective in the application of the knowledge received from the external world. We will use the scientific method to acquire this knowledge, but we will openly acknowledge our ultimate subjectivity. Once we apply knowledge in order to will a certain outcome our objectivity ends and our subjectivity begins. We call this integrating theory and practice, and this is what the Black Panther Party is all about. (Newton and Morrison, 2009: 23)

This suggests that, if the goal of political theorizing is, as Newton suggests, 'to increase our [collective] ability to deal with [the real] world and shape its development' in a progressive manner (Newton et al., 2004: 26), then it must be as open to critique, challenge, and revision in the light of

its social reception as work in the empirical sciences is in light of experimental evidence. This, at least, seems to be how Chicago chapter Chairman Fred Hampton understood the nature of the BPP's legendary breakfast program:

Our Breakfast for Children program is feeding a lot of children and [so] the people understand our Breakfast for Children program. We sayin' something like this – we sayin' that theory's cool, but theory with no practice ain't shit. You've got to have both of them – the two go together. *We have a theory about feeding kids free. What'd we do? We put it into practice. That's how people learn.* A lot of people don't know how serious this thing is... What are we doing?... we are running it in a socialistic manner. People came and took our program, saw it in a socialistic fashion not even knowing it was socialism. *People are gonna take our program and tell us to go on to a higher level.* They gonna take the program and work it in a socialistic manner... We been educating [them], not by reading matter, but through observation and participation. By letting [them] come and work in our program. Not theory and theory alone, but theory and practice. The two go together... This is what the Black Panther Party is about. (Hampton, 1970: 139, emphases added)

Theorizing the emancipation of the people is thus incompatible with the cultist drive to compel them – say, through the pressures of social shame or physical threat – to accept independently developed conclusions, for this effectively amounts to replacing their current masters with self-proclaimed superior ones; as Newton continually reminds us, 'this is something we have to make quite clear: eliminating the controller and assuming the place of the controller are two different things' (Newton et al., 2004: 101). While theorists from the academy and elsewhere can and should play a vital role in both social critique and pragmatic organizing, they can do so only if they accept that 'we can't jump from A to Z, we have to go through all of the development [because] the people tend not to take [even] one step higher; they take half a step higher... this is how we move to higher levels' (Newton and Morrison, 2009: 71). The job of vanguard theory, then, is essentially to 'find out what the people will do and [determine ways to] get them to do that much' (p. 141).

Newton's own concept of 'revolutionary intercommunalism' arose from his conviction that sweeping technological change and global economic integration have ensured that 'nations no longer exist. Nor... will they ever exist again' (Newton et al., 2004: 31). This, he hypothesized, necessitated a break with the cultural revolution favoured by the nationalists, because it is no longer possible for Europe's former 'colonies [to]

decolonize and return to their original existence as nations'; it also meant abandoning the revolutionary internationalism favoured by the socialists because, in his view, American empire had 'transformed itself into a power controlling all the lands and people' across the globe. Because nations had effectively been rendered obsolete, Newton argued that 'the world today is [best understood as] a dispersed collection of communities', which he defined as 'a small unit with a comprehensive collection of institutions that exist to serve a small group of people', although the enduring influence of varied forms of chauvinism ensured that such communities typically (although not exclusively or essentially) were often differentiated and/or interconnected by ethnic or racial identity. Newton's hypothesis, then, implied an experimental practice of 'organizing... Black and [other] oppressed communities', both along and across communal lines, with an eye towards the progressive seizure of local political institutions, as well as the creation of independently organized and staffed 'people's institutions' in order to 'meet the needs of the community until we can all move to change the social conditions that make it impossible for the people to afford the things they need and desire' (Hilliard, 2008: 3). The BPP's famous 'service to the people' programs can thus be read as Newton's own efforts to confirm his intercommunal hypothesis, with the most forceful evidence arising in the incredibly potent Rainbow Coalition formed by the Chicago chapter along with the Puerto Rican Young Lords, the white 'hillbilly' Young Patriots, and other community-specific vanguard parties.⁷

While Newton's central theoretical concept has recently begun to attract the attention of sympathetic scholars (e.g. Narayan, 2019), a critical assessment of it obviously lies outside the purview of this article; as does a response to the numerous critiques of the BPP's lapses in translating intercommunal theory into organizational practice made not only by scholars both hostile (Pearson, 1996) and sympathetic (Henderson, 1997), but by some rank and file Panthers, as well (Shakur, 1987). It is worth emphasizing, however, that, *despite* Newton's own confidence in his hypothesis and bold predictions regarding the future its embrace might produce, *he also intentionally and explicitly* 'left [his own political] program open-ended so that it could develop and people could identify with it', as evinced by the fact that he began with very local, piecemeal, seemingly reformist actions that could only be sustained and directed through community involvement, thereby allowing the people in distinct communities to challenge, alter, or clarify his theses in an ongoing way (Newton and Morrison, 2009: 47). Intercommunalism was thus 'not offered to them as a conclusion' they must accept, but as a theoretical 'vehicle to move them to a higher level' of consciousness and action; one that was to be as informed by the theoretical vanguard as it was by their communal constituencies, as they mutually and continuously revised their shared theory and practice. Thus, while he frequently made clear

that he did not like the internally contradictory reality of things, the slow development of progress, and the need for continual self-criticism of his ideas in light of their popular reception any better than his Leftist opponents, Newton argued that we ‘have to understand that most of the people are not ready for many of the things we talk about now’; consequently, even as they speculatively theorize in advance of the people, Newton – effectively summarizing his essential lesson for the academic Left – argues that the vanguard must strive to ensure that their work is never ‘too far ahead of the masses of people, too far ahead of their thinking’, so as not to alienate them from what is, of necessity, their own struggle (Newton et al., 2004: 46).

Conclusion: The Enduring Relevance of Newton’s Lessons for the Academic Left

My aim in this article has primarily been to highlight and justify the emphasis that Newton’s BPP placed on the need for would-be vanguard intellectuals to be continually and meaningfully *responsible*, precisely by being *directly responsive*, to a concrete and engaged constituency seeking its own emancipation: an emphasis, I would like to suggest briefly in closing, that actually aligns Newton with some recent critiques of the Panthers primarily grounded in the very different conception of the vanguard embraced by groups often understood to be furthering their legacy.

Adolph Reed has long argued that the

oppositional tendency in post-segregation black politics was hampered by its origin in black power ideology. Radicals – all along the spectrum, ranging from cultural nationalist to Stalinist Marxist – began from a stance that took the ‘black community’ as the central configuration of political interest and the source of critical agency... This formulation [presumes] the existence of a racial population that is organically integrated and that operates as a collective subject in pursuit of unitary interests [and thus treats] leaders or spokespersons... not so much representatives as pure embodiments of collective aspirations. (Reed, 1999: 134)

Effectively echoing Newton’s critiques of both black nationalists and white socialists for imposing their conceptions of authentic black interests onto an un-consulted populace – often grounded in a quite distinct and essentialist conception of ‘community’ – Reed claims that many contemporary radical thinkers and activists ‘simply do not see political differences among black people’ as being relevant to the analysis of, or struggle against, racial capitalism (Reed, 2000: 72). Guided more by the judgment of peers than by a confrontation with the conflicted, messier,

and more pressing concerns and interests expressed by the actual consistencies under discussion, 'the substance of [such] political theorizing [has become] a hermetic exercise in sketching a utopian alternative to current social relations' reflective of the distance theorists enjoy from them; the result, Reed argues, has been an often hostile and demobilizing 'debate within and between these tendencies' that 'centred more on . . . internal consistency than on apparent fit with the facts of an external, lived world or verifiably demonstrable capacities for intervening in it' in ways that either further the interests or increase the political capacity of the actual and diverse communities meant to be liberated through them (Reed, 1999: 7).

Recent work by Cedric Johnson traces with exacting historical detail how 'the 'two line struggle' between black nationalists and Marxists descended into parochialism' (Johnson, 2007: 155) as the 1960s passed into the era of reaction, bolstering Reed's (1999: 136) claim that for 'both camps [it was] concern with the internal consistency of the global narrative [that] drove the elaboration of ideological positions' regarding a presumed black community, ensuring that 'neither Marxists nor nationalists offered programs with demonstrable payoffs comparable to those promised by mainstream politicians' to the communities in whose name both camps claimed to speak. This tendency, Johnson (2007) claims, led theorists and many activists away from the kind of responsive social organizing which I have tried to show was key to the BPP's theory and praxis, and into a 'mid-seventies turn to *ideological education*' based on the 'detrimental assumption that ideological clarity must precede political work and that familiarity with the radical canon' of texts and/or correct ideas 'is a prerequisite to meaningful participation in social life'; and, as Johnson notes, 'such education programs . . . tend . . . to *privilege intellectuals in relation to nonelite participants*', replacing a vanguard answerable to a specific constituency with varied forms of brokerage politics where (largely self-proclaimed) *elite representatives of subaltern groups speak in their name*, rather than helping to facilitate the economic and political self-determination of marginalized communities (p. 163, emphases added).

As 'radical theory' has become increasingly 'disconnected from positive social action', both Johnson and Reed suggest that 'radical imagery [has been] cut loose from standards of success or failure' (Reed, 1999: 141) that tie it to the world of concrete organizing, leading to a kind of retreat into 'slogans and anachronistic analogies', or 'potted rhetoric that asserts [the activists'] bona fides, without concern for communicating outside the ranks of believers' (Reed, 2000: 194–195); that is, the post-1960s trends in theorizing about economically and socially marginalized constituencies have effectively removed any material

restraint on those radical tendencies' flight into idealism because claiming [to know, speak for, or distantly support] such a base

obviated two key practical tests of theories and strategies as explanations and mechanisms of mobilization: (1) whether they can persuade a significant number of actual members of specific populations targeted for mobilization, and (2) whether they can guide action efficaciously. (Reed, 1999: 17–18)

Conversely, because they have become disconnected from a genuine vanguard, long-suffering communities have become increasingly less engaged with progressive politics, strategic coalitions, and mass mobilization, and increasingly resign themselves to the limited options for advancement that remain within the current alignment, alternately embracing neoliberal or Right-populist solutions to the enduring problems of racial and economic inequality. Both Reed and Johnson have thus been sharply critical of modes of ‘contemporary organizing’ grounded in ‘the notion of black exceptionalism’, or the ‘insistence upon the uniqueness of the black predicament and on the need for race-specific remedies’ (Johnson, 2017), and have criticized, for example, the hegemonic role played by the Black Lives Matter organization on the contemporary Left, for ‘assuming a rather simplistic view of black people’s ambitions and interests and drawing a false dividing line between the interests of black and non-blacks’.

However, despite the obvious resonances between their shared critique of intellectual vanguards and the one explicated above, because both theorists hold that this view ‘descends from Black Power thinking [in that it] presumes a commonality of interest among blacks and claims [elite] authority to speak on behalf of those interests’, both credit Newton and the BPP with *inspiring* this transition, rather than – as we have seen above – presciently warning against its omnipresent danger and deleterious consequences. While Johnson acknowledges that the BPP ‘represented a more revolutionary alternative to the more conservative black ethnic politics’ of cultural nationalism, he nevertheless holds that their ‘embrace... of black exceptionalism abided by [many of] the same logics’ that dominate current theorizing and activism surrounding black liberation; thus, in challenging the hegemonic discourse of racial exceptionalism, he simultaneously calls for a turn away from the BPP model of organizing and from a ‘nostalgia’ for their era of influence, most vociferously in an article entitled ‘The Panthers Can’t Save Us Now’ (Johnson, 2017). Reed is even less sympathetic with Newton’s legacy, for he sees the (as we have seen above, quite fraught) example of ‘the Students for a Democratic Society’s 1969 proclamation of the Black Panther party as the “vanguard of the black revolution”’ as reflective of the ‘distortion of political judgment into a search for authenticity, hauntingly like white youth’s quest in the 1960s for the most “authentic” blues’; on the largely white, academic-led Left, he identifies a longstanding trend towards political ‘exoticism’ that eschews concrete political analysis and organizing in favor of ‘thin and simplistic definitions of

good guys and bad, “true” leaders and false’ (Reed, 2000: 71–73), with ‘approved’ black spokespersons featuring prominently in the former role. It is thus in large measure the white Left’s ongoing embrace of ‘Pantherphile exoticism’ (p. 71) that grounds Reed’s dismissive view that the BPP ‘added [little more than] props and uniforms to make radical politics entirely a show business proposition’ (Reed, 1999: 72). Neither theorist, however, attends to the strong tensions between the BPP and the purported vanguards of black culturalist and white socialist resistance of their time; tensions that ultimately and tragically revealed the dangers inherent in their divergent, but similarly Manichean, worldviews.

While the BPP faced surveillance, harassment arrests, and other forms of police brutality from their inception, the first lethal violence they suffered came in early 1969, when cultural nationalists from the US organization⁸ (most likely at the instigation of the FBI, but in direct response to Newton’s harsh criticisms of their political program) murdered Panther representatives Bunchy Carter and John Huggins during a conflict over the newly created University of California Black Studies program, in which US sought to control the program’s hires and content, while the Panthers pushed for involving the local, off-campus community at all stages of decision-making.⁹ Shortly thereafter, an SDS splinter group that called itself the Weather Underground – once again, over the strenuous objections of local Panther leadership – staged the ‘Days of Rage’, which mainly consisted of vandalizing lower-middle-class areas of Chicago in an effort to ‘bring the war home’; an action that was exploited by local police to help secure the warrant that led to the state assassination of Rainbow Coalition founder Fred Hampton.¹⁰ There could hardly be starker demonstrations of the intrinsic dangers of the flunkeyism that always arises when one seeks to instruct, rather than serve the people, or confuses one’s own speculative theorizing for their authentic will.

An assessment of their critique of the contemporary Left obviously lies beyond the scope of this article; however, if Johnson is correct to claim not only that ‘black ethnic politics has reached its ends or limits as an effective set of political practices’, but, moreover, ‘that the ends or aims of contemporary African American politics must become radically democratic in form and aspirations’ (Johnson, 2007: 218), and if Reed (1999: 50–51) is correct in arguing that

encouraging popular participation is the only effective possibility for reinvigorating a progressive movement in black political life because people respond by organizing themselves when offered concrete visions that connect with their lives as they experience them, not to ideological abstractions or generic agendas that perfume narrow class programs,

then the problem is how we move from a political landscape fragmented by both the rhetoric and reality of racial division into a coalition of movements capable of effecting the transformations necessary to overcome such division, as well as the class repression that requires it; this is, of course, the very problem with which Newton struggled throughout his active career, and while his answers remain somewhat speculative, his practical efforts to confirm them through the BPP's service programs and unique brand of coalition politics bore undeniable, considerable, and suggestive fruit. Revolutionary intercommunalism may thus be of great aid in theorizing and organizing our way through the current impasse, and remains, in my view, a hypothesis deserving of further testing; but, regardless, I hope to have shown that Newton and the BPP should be grasped as essential resources as we seek to close the seemingly widening gap between theory and practice, or more precisely, between theorists and the people. At the very least, their history and legacy serve as stark reminders of the need to continually work to ground our necessary – but necessarily speculative – theorizing in the understanding that 'dropouts understand things students don't' (Newton et al., 2004: 85).

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Notes

1. Seale didn't mince words, claiming the BPP, for example, 'looked upon the Peace and Freedom Party as a predominantly white organization [working] for the white community' (Seale, 1991: 208).
2. A document from a faction of RYM, cited in Barber (2006: 236). This is the logic that led RYM to, for example, back out of endorsing the BPP's efforts at organizing a United Front Against Fascism.
3. Speaking at Yale in 1971, Newton chastised a student who demanded to know about the relevance of the BPP's work to recent events on their campus, including the arrest of Bobby Seale and Erika Huggins, claiming 'I won't indulge in your desire to merely talk in a classroom about the possibility of Erika going to the chair', and that he would only 'talk about them in the courtroom and outside on the Green, where our talk might mean something' (Newton et al., 2004: 65).
4. Compare: 'The Black Panther Party has chosen materialists assumptions on which to ground its ideology. This is a purely arbitrary choice. Idealism might be the real happening; we might not be here at all' (Newton et al., 2004: 23); 'We are not against intelligence. The Party is very intelligent, and we read the same materials that the college students have read' (Seale, 1991: 211).
5. I reconstruct Newton's dialectical account of political will in Vernon (2014).
6. Compare:

A vanguard is like the head of a spear, the thing that goes first. But what really hurts is the butt of the spear, because even though the head makes the necessary entrance, the back part is what penetrates. Without the butt, a spear is nothing but a toothpick. (Newton et al., 2004: 44)

Newton's ideology is distinct, then, from the Leninist conception of a vanguard party (see, e.g., Gdala's concluding 'Historical Specifics', in Newton et al., 2004: 173–188) as well as from the non-linear politics of resistance attributed to him by Caygill (2013).

7. On the Chicago BPP Chapter's Rainbow Coalition, see Williams (2013), Sonnie and Tracey (2011) and Enck-Wanzer (2010).
8. Founded nearly simultaneously to the BPP, US became a vehicle for the Afrocentric ideology of Maunala Karenga, the inventor of Kwanzaa. From their promotion of a return to African language and rituals to their very choice of name which rigidly opposed 'US' to 'them' – they exemplified the Manichean worldview that, as we have seen, was the focus on much of Newton's critique of purported vanguards. While even today you can find references to them as the 'United Slaves', this was in fact the derisive name the Panthers used for, arguably, their central rivals in California.
9. The details of this conflict can be found, e.g., in Bloom and Martin (2013: 218–220). For the BPP take on Black Studies in the academy, see, e.g., Hilliard (1970), and for a broader discussion of the early development of Black Studies, see Rojas (2007).
10. The circumstances of the Hampton assassination are recounted in painstaking detail in Haas (2010).

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