

Afterword To *Panther Vision: Essential Party Writings and Art of Kevin Rashid Johnson, Minister of Defense New Afrikan Black Panther Party—Prison Chapter* (Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2015) 458-464.

by George Katsiaficas

“When the prison doors are opened, the real dragons will fly out.” —Ho Chi Minh

From the dungeons of Amerika, where silence and isolation are daily enforced, Rashid Johnson’s voice rings out with unmistakable clarity. His call for revolution of the global capitalist system could not be more unequivocal. The clarity of his analysis unmasks the violence faced by prisoners—a fact of daily life for more than two million inmates in the USA (a higher proportion of prisoners to population than in North Korea). In the name of human rights, Amerika has murdered *millions* of innocent civilians since World War 2, from Korea to Vietnam and more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan. While much the rest of the world abhors capital punishment and lifetime imprisonment, Amerikan judicial practice is little more than a contemporary form of slavery. The masters get away with murder while those at the bottom of the hierarchy face deprivation and hardship.

Even captured North Korean infiltrators who spent decades in prison have been released by South Korea, white Weatherpeople were declared immune from prosecution, and many captured RAF prisoners were released by German authorities. Yet dozens of Afrikan-Amerikan freedom fighters languish behind bars, with no prospects for liberation from confinement. In Amerika’s gulags, how many thousands have abandoned hope of ever again being free?

Rather than considering themselves simply as victims of the prison-industrial complex, however, Rashid and the New Afrikan Black Panther Party-Prison Chapter (NABPP-PC) carry forward the struggle for freedom from one generation to the next. Within the belly of the beast, their determination and energy proudly claims the tradition of the original Black Panther Party founded in 1966. Rashid and the NABPP-PC boldly speak truth to power.¹ They fight racism with solidarity and stand up to injustice in their daily lives. Inspired by his intelligence and determination, the new Panthers for whom he speaks are organized among the most oppressed within the USA. The threat they pose to the powers-that-be stands in direct proportion to the brutality meted out to them.

Years of sadistic violence aimed at quelling Rashid’s indomitable spirit have only further radicalized him. His treatment at the hands of malevolent guards has been exceptional. Sentenced in Virginia to life in prison, he was named that state’s “most dangerous inmate,” after which he was regularly confronted with violence from guards and denied basic rights such as

¹ Rashid exposes abuses of the prison system and speaks truth to power in these essays: “Prison Assisted Suicide — The Texas Way” available at rashidmod.com.; “Why No Indictment Was Issued Against the Cop that Killed Michael Brown”; “Revisiting the Killings of Prisoners by Texas Prison Officials” and many other exposes of the systematic violation of rights under the prison-industrial regime.

proper health care, family visits and letters from friends (among whom I am proud to count myself). Transferred overnight and without notice 3,000 miles away to Oregon, Rashid was suddenly immersed in a prison system with a majority white population where white supremacists openly paraded. Within a few months, he had forged interracial alliances that threatened the system's divide and rule strategy. Without warning, he was transferred to Texas just as suddenly as he had been expelled from Virginia. Once again he was accosted with the violence of miscreant jailers.

More than forty years ago, prison writings such as George Jackson's *Soledad Brother* and *Blood in My Eye* played significant roles in inspiring us. George's trenchant expose in theory and practice of how rule by force rather than consent dominated our lives resulted in his murder in 1971. As society becomes more like a prison under the surveillance state, his insights—like those of Rashid—become even more perceptive. As Amerika moves toward a system of total control by a secret government, our lives on the outside increasingly resemble the conditions under which prisoners live. In clear prose, Rashid unmask such lies as that the 1960s civil rights movement ended racism, corporate capitalism works for the benefit of the majority, and prisoners for life have lost their humanity. His loving faith in people is revealed in the precise strokes of his artwork, strikingly realistic images crafted with ordinary pen and paper.

Although I have never met Rashid in person, I have felt the glow of his gentle love. In 2012, after my comrade-soulmate suddenly passed, I was as low as one can get in this life. Within days, Rashid embraced me with a loving drawing he sent, a pen and ink piece that was one of the first pieces of mail I received after Shin Eun-jung had left me to my isolation. He enclosed a letter explaining how his need for love, for a partner with whom he could live and work, would never be fulfilled. By sharing his sorrow with me in my moment of loss and desperation, we touched souls. Our common ground strengthened the bond we felt as revolutionaries in the center of imperialism.

[Insert drawing of Shin Eun-jung here]

You—reader—you will feel Rashid's love in the pages here. These are organizational documents, which if written by any normal bureaucrat, progressive or not, would put even the most ardent true believer to sleep. Yet, as you absorb Rashid's passion and intelligence in these pages, you will discover a deep humanity. Many of you, I suspect, will be unable to sleep after reading Rashid's prose—neither to sleep that evening nor to return to the deep sleep that might have overtaken you.

But it is not merely personal feelings that compel me to work with Rashid to finish his book. Indeed, as he (and anyone who has read my work) knows well, we have many political differences. Why then have I spent dozens of hours helping bring his book to print? My political sense is that revolutionary solidarity across ideological barriers could be a key factor in determining the difference between our movement's future victory and defeat. How often have I pondered the question: If only Russian and Chinese Communists had united against the USA, how different might the outcome of the 20th century have been?

Because I reject the state's censorship of Rashid's ideas, I work to break the chains engulfing

him within Amerika's gulags. I also reject the kind of Left sectarianism that has brought murder, mayhem and isolation into liberation movements the world over. Real solidarity demands that all of us support the movement's political prisoners, even if we have disagreements with their actions or perspectives.

As an intellectual, I feel a responsibility to help give voice to insurgencies. By facilitating the publication of Rashid's book, I assist propagating his unique clarity of mind as he cuts through obfuscations and hesitations to expose the violent reality he knows only too well. Within the prison-industrial complex, Rashid's ideas build resistance and solidarity—no small feat under his circumstances.

When Rashid and I first got to know each other, I wondered: what could I possibly offer him? After some thought, I decided that the best possible means of showing my solidarity would be to send him the most trenchant critique of his writing I could muster—and I did. After we exchanged two letters, however, the state intervened, blocking my letters from delivery, cutting off further discussion. Permit me here to elaborate.

In this book, Rashid lays out his organizational blueprint for building a revolutionary party modeled on that of Lenin and Mao Zedong—and continuing the struggles of the original Black Panthers. In my view, the Leninist party is an outmoded organizational form developed more than a century ago under very different conditions than those we face in 2014. Moreover, the very democratic centralism that Rashid embraces was a key reason for the BPP's demise.

The historical specificity of successful organizations, the suitability of the Bolsheviks to 1917 Russia, of Mao's Communist Party to 1949 China, is proven by their seizures of power. Similarly, the place in history of the IWW, SDS and the Panthers correlate with the massive popular resonance each of these formations enjoyed. For whatever reason, each of these organizations has been reincarnated decades after they all but disappeared along with the vital popular movements that spawned them. Without the innovative energy of their initial emergence, inherited organizational forms can inhibit as much as they inspire and activate.

Precisely because the New Afrikan Black Panther Party-Prison Chapter continues the original mission of the Black Panther Party and takes its organizational form from them, it is important to consider the role of democratic centralism in the dissolution of the Panthers in the early 1970s. Was too much power in the hands of one person—or two people—regardless of how we understand the factions inside the organization that fought for control of the Party? Should multi-dimensional tendencies have been encouraged, not repressed?

I agree with Rashid that, "What the Panthers lacked, however, was a theoretical leader like Lenin who was rooted in and able to wage the decisive struggle to keep a genuinely revolutionary proletarian line in command of its ideology and work. Therefore, this split saw both factions follow the same flawed 'liquidationist' lines that Lenin had struggled against – namely one of rightist reformism and legalism (Huey's faction) and the other of ultra left militarism (Clever's faction)."

At the same time that the Panthers split, the mass movement was growing by leaps and bounds. As police and FBI infiltrated, attacked, and assassinated members of the BPP, the Party had to close itself off for its own survival. Its relationship with the popular movement became strained. The growing gap between the BPP and the movement it led was most visible at the 1970 Revolutionary Peoples' Constitutional Convention—the high point of the 1960s in the USA, when more than ten thousand of us gathered in Philadelphia at the invitation of the BPP to write a new constitution for the USA. Revealed in reports written by decentralized workshops, the popular movement's aspirations were far ahead of the BPP's positions. Yet with the split in the Party, Huey decided to liquidate all chapters outside Oakland, where he hoped to build an exemplary commune as the basis for revolutionary intercommunalism. Facilitated by “democratic centralism,” Huey unilaterally expelled dozens of comrades, left others to face decades of prison, and liquidated dissident voices within the Party as he shut it down as a national organization. Huey shut down the Party without engaging in any meaningful discussion among the members about the decision.

Hindsight allows us today to look back with greater clarity than was possible in 1970. Yet even then, some among us sought to revolutionize the revolution. Herbert Marcuse understood we needed a “new, very flexible kind of organization, one that does not impose rigorous principles, one that allows for movement and initiative. An organization without the ‘bosses’ of the old parties or political groups. This point is very important. The leaders of today are the products of publicity. In the actual movement there are no leaders as there were in the Bolshevik Revolution, for example.”

From the dungeons of Pennsylvania, Russell “Maroon” Shoatz has already articulated criticisms that Marxist-Leninist parties that have “...gained power using DC have always ended up using it to defeat the aspirations of the workers and the oppressed, and to install themselves as the new ruling class.” His point should give pause to notions of simply adopting that DC organizational form in the future. Furthermore, while parties aligned with the 3rd International led successful takeovers of power in Russia, China, Vietnam, and North Korea, “Leninist” parties in the core of capitalism in the 20th century betrayed or opposed revolutionary movements in France in 1968 and Italy in 1977. Rashid would rightly say that neither of these latter two were Maoist parties—but then, I must ask: What about the Khmer Rouge's killing of more than 1 million Cambodians after power fell into their hands with the defeat of US imperialism in Indochina in 1975?

In tying together the 1960s Panthers with 21st century social movements, isn't it possible that revolutionary organizations might break with inherited organizational forms? Clearly leadership by the most oppressed—as the Panthers were for the vibrant Rainbow Coalition that emerged in the 1960s—remains historically necessary. Might future Panthers have a participatory democratic structure? Can a revolutionary party celebrate differences, while uniting the many to defeat the few? Certainly not with a single central committee thinking for the whole movement—let alone one that kidnaps and kills leading activists who disagree with them—as tragically befell thousands of comrades in Russia and Spain, to say nothing of many others killed by Stalinist violence.

Democratic centralism with people like Rashid would be a pleasure, but in the real world of male competitive power politics, it means sectarianism, hierarchy—or worse, far worse. I do not doubt

that Rashid would be diligent and flexible, that, he would do as he says—to “discuss things thoroughly and practice mutual criticism in a comradely way. Strive to reach consensus. Uphold decisions by the majority.” The tendency that is encouraged within organizations founded on democratic centralism, however, is to elevate leadership above general members, to insulate the elite from criticisms, and to punish dissident voices.

Under the prison conditions faced by Rashid and those caged within the dungeons of Amerika, DC may make sense. Secretive and centrally organized actions may well need to be the modus operandi when faced with 24/7 surveillance. But for those of us outside the realm of daily imprisonment, those of us lucky enough to enjoy daily personal freedoms such as freedom of mobility, internet access, choice of partners and roommates, choice of action, etc., DC would be to regiment ourselves to commands of a hierarchy whose mission—“the revolution”—often compels those at the top to dictate what they consider necessary restrictions on our actions, sometimes with fatal consequences. The dictates of DC require us to give up freedoms won through centuries of struggle and accomplishment. If we ourselves cannot be free, if we cannot expand upon liberties won through past struggles, how can the “revolution” advance?

The point of revolution is to liberate us from the confines of a lives that compel us to make a living rather than simply living, to make our life decisions based upon externally imposed restrictions and demands—most fundamentally the necessity to work longer hours for more years in exchange for less money, as demanded by contemporary neoliberalism. Revolution means to expand the personal freedoms we already enjoy or it is not revolution at all. If those committed to revolution become order-takers of the CC, how can we expect them to help to build a society in which the majority of people decide for themselves, in free and open communal deliberations, the direction we take?

Very often, anyone in revolutionary formations who is bold enough to offer a different view than what comes down from leadership is automatically written off as “petty bourgeois”—at best or, in less familiar moments, “racist” or “sexist” (when those they criticize are different in race or gender)—or even traitorous. Regarding “non-proletarian” insights as less worthy, a judgment is routinely made that marginalizes the “petty bourgeois”—as well as the lumpenproletariat. No matter how reactionary they were found to be by Marx in 19th century Paris, the lumpen have been a central constituency for the Panthers and many other movements. We should therefore be cautious with completely negative evaluations of “non-proletarian” constituencies. Rashid takes a step in that direction: “The petty-bourgeoisie have produced some fine revolutionary intellectuals and leaders for the revolutionary proletarian movement, such as Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, Cabral, Nkrumah and so on, but on the whole, many more have been disappointments.”

Clearly, Rashid believes that the M-L party is a product of “proletarian” thinking. In his article, “On the Vanguard Party, Once Again,” Rashid writes:

“But the critical problem which opponents of the vanguard party have never answered in over 100 years of debate is the theoretical and practical question of how to unify the broad and fragmented working class into a united movement wherein it is *conscious of itself (and its interests) as a class.*”

This is a critical point of departure for I believe that the answer is that workers—and the vast majority of society—must do this for themselves if genuine freedom (a socialism worthy of the name) is to exist. The difference between heteronomously imposed and autonomously determined unity is crucial.

Every genuine revolution develops its own theory in accordance with local conditions. In China, Mao insisted upon a break with the Russian Revolution's strategy of seizing power through urban insurrections after mechanical imitations cost the movement tens of thousands of lives. For his critique, he was expelled from the party. In Vietnam, Ho and Giap insisted upon a break with Chinese human wave assaults prior to victory at Dien Bien Phu. They instead ordered trenches to be dug increasingly closer to enemy positions, saving many lives in the process. Rashid does not simply take as ready-made the original Panther form. By including White Panthers and Brown Panthers within the NABPP-PC as well as forging an alliance with the Red Heart Warrior Society, he adapts his vision to contemporary conditions.

As Marx famously said, we do not make history under conditions we select, “but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” It is no accident, therefore, that at the same time as Huey P. Newton articulated his vision of “revolutionary intercommunalism,” anarchist thinker Murray Bookchin arrived at a similar conclusion—although he named it “libertarian municipalism.” Historical conditions have created the possibility of reduced governmental powers and increased power to the people. In the 21st century, as we move in the direction of revolutionary intercommunal struggles, wouldn't that involve communes in different parts of the world forming from below and entering into alliances with each other? We already see emergent communal forms in the Gwangju Uprising of 1980, in the seizure of Taksim and Tahrir Squares. The task of revolutionary organization would be to stabilize the participatory character of decision-making in communes in every region while lubricating connections from the grassroots nationally and internationally. At each of these levels, many formations and types of organizations will be involved. There will be no single vanguard party leading the way forward, but many vanguards, such as Zapatistas, Occupy Wall Streeters, *Indignados*, the Greek anarchists and Tunisian actor-activists.

Despite all differences, Rashid has much to teach all of us—and not only those enrolled in “poor man's universities.” He and his comrades in the NABPP-PC continue the Panthers' glorious tradition. They refuse to submit to authoritarian control no matter what the cost. Their solution to the problem faced by all of us today is not simply to reform the existing system. They speak for the most oppressed within the global imperialist system. All revolutionaries should offer them support and respect.

Panther love!
All Power to the People!

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