

REVOLUTIONARY SUICIDE

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Writers and Readers 

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My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

LANGSTON HUGHES, "The Negro
Speaks of Rivers"

Learning

Life was opening up for me. I was trying to relate to Donald Warden and his program, trying to stay close with my righteous partners on the block, and also attending Oakland City College on a "come-and-go" basis. My motivation had been to prove to my high school teachers that they were wrong about me. To my surprise I found myself enjoying the learning process and tremendously stimulated by ideas I encountered. Since I had studied classical piano for almost seven years, I took music appreciation, music history, music theory, and also art appreciation and art history.

Most semesters I started out with a regular load, but if something came up in class that excited my imagination, I sometimes skipped classes, gathered as many books and materials as I could find on the subject, and stayed in the library or at home in my apartment reading.

While studying psychology, for example, I became fascinated with the principle of stimulus response and the biological behaviorism of John B. Watson. I read a number of books on the subject, works by B. F. Skinner and Pavlov, and read about their studies and theories of personality and human development. By the time I was satiated with stimulus response, or whatever, the class had moved on to another unit that was of no interest to me.

Philosophy was another favorite subject. I still remember some of the issues raised in logic class thirteen years ago. Such points as the

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difference between lexical and stipulative definitions I use in discussions today. Even now I find it difficult to enter into a dialogue on philosophy or Black Panther ideology until there is agreement on basic definitions. This presents problems 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. They either do not want to learn or they do not believe that I can think.

I was also impressed with A. J. Ayer's logical positivism, particularly his distinction between three kinds of statements—the analytical statement, the synthetic statement, and statements of assumption. These ideas have helped me to develop my own thinking and ideology. Ayer once stated, "Nothing can be real if it cannot be conceptualized, articulated, and shared." That notion stuck with me and became very important when I began to use the ideological method of dialectical materialism as a world view. The ideology of the Black Panthers stands on that premise and proceeds on that basis, to conceptualize, articulate, and share. Some key aspects of Black Panther ideology and rhetoric, like "All Power to the People" and the concept "pig," developed out of that. They were not haphazardly introduced into our thinking or vocabulary.

While studying philosophy, I realized that I had been moving for some time toward existentialism. I read Camus, Sartre, and Kierkegaard and saw that their teachings were similar to lessons I had learned from the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible. Actually the "Preacher" was the first existentialist:

All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath.

This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion. . . .

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

From then on, I began to engage friends in existentialist discussions. If a brother was hungry, I would say that it is all the same whether you are hungry or full, whether you are cold or warm. It is all the same. They *really* thought I was crazy. Then I began living like an existentialist, hitchhiking to Los Angeles and back, walking into the class dirty, without shoes, and sometimes soaked to the skin from the rain. It was all the same to me. One way or another I kept my reputation going. All the time I was on the streets I read Ecclesiastes at least once a month, until I was sentenced to the penitentiary, where they refused me all reading material.

I was still questioning. Although college work did not give me answers as such, I was beginning to comprehend human beings and the universe, to feel I could develop answers that suited my own experience and my knowledge of the world. Then, too, I was convincing myself that they had been wrong about me in public schools. When that teacher told me to write "business" on the board, she wanted to show the class that I was stupid; when they discouraged me from going to college, it was because they thought I was stupid. As a matter of fact, some of my college teachers thought I was stupid, too, because I never did well on those silly little tests they gave us. One psychology teacher told me that I scored at the level of a "dull normal" on an I.Q. test. Since I really liked this teacher, that hurt me badly. Then he gave another test, which he said "indicated" that I was intelligent. Only I knew what was happening inside of me; only I knew what was happening between me and those books up in my apartment. I was learning, and learning well. I could think, I could read, and I could retain the most difficult ideas. For over twelve years, they had tried to knock me down, but I kept getting up, and now I was advancing on them.

What I learned from Sonny Man also helped me to acquire an education. I was free to pursue my education in my own style, because I could support myself with activities on the block. Most important, I did not have to work. I ran gambling sessions at my apartment, serving as the "houseman." This meant that I set up the games—cards or craps—for everybody else to participate in, and then took a cut of the winnings.

It was my studying and reading in college that led me to become a socialist. The transformation from a nationalist to a socialist was a slow one, although I was around a lot of Marxists. I even attended a few

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meetings of the Progressive Labor Party, but nothing was happening there, just a lot of talk and dogmatism, unrelated to the world I knew. I supported Castro all the way. I even accepted an invitation to visit Cuba and recruited others for the trip, but I never made it. When I presented my solutions to the problems of Black people, or when I expressed my philosophy, 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 works of the socialists and began to see a strong similarity between my beliefs and theirs. My conversion was complete when I read the four volumes of Mao Tse-tung to learn more about the Chinese Revolution. It was my life plus independent reading that made me a socialist—nothing else.

I became convinced of the benefits of collectivism and a collectivist ideology. I also saw the link between racism and the economics of capitalism, although, despite the link, I recognized that it was necessary to separate the concepts in analyzing the general situation. In psychological terms, racism could continue to exist even after the economic problems that had created racism had been resolved. Never convinced that destroying capitalism would automatically destroy racism, I felt, however, that we could not destroy racism without wiping out its economic foundation. It was necessary to think much more creatively and independently about these complex interconnections.

Even though I liked my lectures and the discussions, I did not identify with the life style on campus. As soon as I finished my classes, I would go down to the block—sometimes to Sacramento Street in Berkeley or over into West or East Oakland—and drink wine, gamble, and fight. More than once I came from the block to class dead drunk. I never minded being drunk in class because the ideas were more intoxicating; but I had instructors who hated having anyone go to the bathroom while they were lecturing. It disturbed them. But when you are full of wine, you just cannot hold your urine.

College was enjoyable, largely because I was not forced to go; this made it different from high school. I could go to school or stay in my apartment and read. Some days I went to a movie or stayed on the block. I started each semester setting my own pace, which often included a trip to Mexico, or to jail, or dropping out, and all along I learned a great deal.

In spite of the learning, I was still searching for answers to other

questions. The Afro-American Association had been a deep disappointment. I had often felt that it was nothing more than a training ground for the Muslims; Warden seemed to have adopted a lot of their styles and rhetoric. I began to investigate them more closely. I had read C. Eric Lincoln's book *Black Muslims in America*, but what attracted me most was Minister Malcolm X.

I first heard Malcolm X speak at McClymonds High School in Oakland, when he attended a conference sponsored by the Afro-American Association on "The Mind of the Ghetto." Muhammad Ali (then Cassius Clay) was with Malcolm, and he told about his conversion to Islam. He was not yet the heavyweight champion. Malcolm X impressed me with his logic and with his disciplined and dedicated mind. Here was a man who combined the world of the streets and the world of the scholar, a man so widely read he could give better lectures and cite more evidence than many college professors. He was also practical. Dressed in the loose-fitting style of a strong prison man, he knew what the street brothers were like, and he knew what had to be done to reach them. Malcolm had a program: armed defense when attacked, and reaching the people with ideas and programs that speak to their condition. At the same time, he identified the causes of their condition instead of blaming the people.

I started going to the Muslim mosques in both Oakland and San Francisco, although not regularly. However, I knew a number of Muslims and talked to them fairly often. I did read their paper regularly to follow the speeches and ideas of Malcolm. I would have joined them, but I could not deal with their religion. By this time, I had had enough of religion and could not bring myself to adopt another one. I needed a more concrete understanding of social conditions. References to God or Allah did not satisfy my stubborn questioning.

Back at the college, Kenny Freeman along with Isaac Moore, Doug Allen, Ernie Allen, Alex Papillon, and some others had begun to organize the West Coast branch of RAM, the Revolutionary Action Movement. They claimed to function as an underground movement, but instead of revolutionary action, they indulged in a lot of revolutionary talk, none of it underground. They were all college students, with bourgeois skills, who wrote a lot. Eventually, they became so infiltrated with agents that when an arrest was made, the police spent all their time showing each other their badges.

Bobby Seale tried to get me into the RAM chapter, but the members

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refused to accept me. They said I lived in the Oakland hills and was too bourgeois, which was an absolute lie. All my life I have lived in the flatlands. Actually, I think I threatened them, because I could use my head but could also "get down" like the street brothers. They claimed to be dedicated to the armed overthrow of the government, when, in reality, most of them were headed for professional occupations within the system. Freeman and the other RAM members eventually excluded Bobby because he lacked bourgeois skills.

RAM formed a front group on campus, the Soul Students Advisory Council, and Kenny Freeman stacked it with his boys. I became very active in it, joining the main thrust to get a course in Negro history into the curriculum. We held street meetings outside the college and met with the administrators, who offered foolish reasons about why Negro history should not be offered; most of them came down to the belief that Black people had no history to teach. We eventually brought about a few changes, not many, and for a short while RAM seemed very engaging to me. I considered it the answer to many things I was searching for and felt fulfilled when I talked with others about the African past and what we had contributed to the world (all the groups I went through had that in common). Everyone—from Warden and the Afro-American Association to Malcolm X and the Muslims to all the other groups active in the Bay Area at that time—believed strongly that the failure to include Black history in the college curriculum was a scandal. We all set out to do something about it.

The Soul Students Advisory Council lacked any real depth, and when we succeeded in getting the Black history class on campus, we had nothing else to do. There were the usual parties and other social activities, but these had no real meaning for me and provided no satisfaction.