

James Boggs: Think Dialectically, Not Biologically

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This is the first opportunity I have had to speak to an audience in Atlanta, a city which in the last few years has become the center for many tendencies in intellectual and political thinking by Blacks. Many black groups from all over the country have held conferences here, and in this process you have had an opportunity to evaluate the movement of the black indigenous forces which erupted in the 1960s and within a few years brought this whole country into its present state of social upheaval.

Here in the, South, which gave birth to the movement all over the country, we should be especially able to see the difference between the present movement and past movements. For although there have been many revolts and rebellions in other sections of the United States - revolts and rebellions which have led to some social and economic reforms - the

present movement which started out in the South was unique. It was unique because at its inception it raised the human question in its most fundamental form. What is the appropriate relationship between human beings, between one man and another? The movement began as a quest for a higher form of human relationships between people, relations not yet shared and not even believed in by most people, but which those who launched the movement believed could or should be shared by people in the United States.

In raising the question of human relations so fundamentally, this movement touched every person in the United States, North and South, and for a period of time it seemed that the country - despite the obvious divisions and opposition of many - would be lifted to a new level of human relationships. Instead, today, nearly twenty years after the movement began in the 1950s, we are experiencing the most dehumanized, blackmailing relationships between blacks and whites, and between blacks and blacks. In terms of material conditions, most blacks are much off than they were twenty years ago at the beginning of the black movement. But in terms of relations among ourselves as human beings, we are all worse off. This is the reality which we must be willing to face squarely.

I shall not attempt to review the many struggles and confrontations which created the movement. You know and have experienced these either directly or indirectly. What I want to emphasize instead is that this kind of struggle could only have been unleashed in the South. This is not just because the South was more racist or more impoverished - which it surely was. Rather it is because in the South the tradition of viewing blacks as inferior had been rationalized and given legitimacy by a philosophy. All over the country, the philosophy that one set of human beings is inferior to another on the basis of race was practiced. But in the South this philosophy was not only practiced; it was preached. Therefore the movement which was organized to struggle against racism in the South also had to develop a philosophy as the basis for struggle; the philosophy of the essential dignity of every human being, regardless of race, sex or national origin. That is why the movement began to draw everybody into it - either pro or con - because it put forward a philosophy with which everybody, regardless of race, color or sex, had to grapple.

In our lifetime we have also witnessed how no social upheaval in any one part of this country can be isolated indefinitely from social upheaval in the rest of this country. Therefore what started out in the South as a movement whose aim was chiefly to reform the South quickly spread all over the country. Everybody, oppressed and oppressor, was drawn into the confrontation.

But when everyone is drawn into a conflict which is as deeply rooted in the history of a society as racism is rooted in this society, there is no telling how far the struggle will have to go. You begin to open up contradictions which most people in the society have been evading or tolerating - for various reasons. Some because they benefit from them - as many

do; others because they believe these are beyond their power to challenge or negate - as blacks used to think; and still others because they think that to confront these contradictions will create too much antagonism and upheaval.

Once the struggle began to extend out of the South, it became clear that every institution of this country, economic, social, political, cultural, was based upon keeping blacks at the bottom. The whole development of this country had been based upon treating blacks as scavengers, to take the leavings of whatever whites considered beneath them-whether these were jobs or houses, churches or whole neighborhoods. In this process of treating blacks as scavengers, United States capitalism had been able to develop more rapidly than any other country in the world because it has had the wherewithal to exploit on a double basis. Not only was it able to exploit wage labor in production and the consumer in the market, as every capitalist society does. But when factories and machinery became obsolete for the exploitation of whites, capitalism could always use them for the exploitation of blacks. Used plants, used houses, used churches, used clothing, used anything and everything, could be recycled. After being discarded by whites, they could always be used or re-used, to exploit blacks both in production and consumption. Thus all whites in this country could get to the top faster because blacks were kept at the bottom.

In providing this opportunity for rapid upward mobility to whites, the system of American capitalism has developed very differently from other capitalisms. First of all, this country, from the very beginning, had to import labor, either by force or by promises. Secondly, every ethnic group which came to this country voluntarily came in order to get to the top as quickly as it could.- Therefore these groups closed their eyes to the obvious fact that they were able to rise as rapidly only because the indigenous labor force of the blacks was being excluded from the same opportunities. In this way the system of American racism - or the institutionalized exclusion of blacks from equal opportunity - was inseparably interconnected with American capitalism - or the system of upward mobility for special ethnic and special interest groups at the expense of others. Whites could not see this because they were the beneficiaries of the system.

The eruption of the black movement exposed the historical connection between racism and capitalism in the U.S.. and also made it clear that it is not possible to get rid of racism in this country without getting rid of American capitalism; any more than it was possible to carry on a struggle to reform the South without carrying on a struggle to change this entire nation. How is it possible to get rid of racism without getting rid of the method of thinking which has become ingrained in the American people as a result of the special historical development of this country, namely, that special groups should advance at the expense of others?

There is a very important dialectical principle here which every student of political science

needs to understand. A struggle may start out with the aim of resolving one contradiction. But in the course of the struggle, if the contradiction which it sets out to negate is fundamental enough, the main contradiction may change; it may become enlarged or expanded. Struggle is social practice and when you engage in social practice, you gain new insights. -You find out that there was much more involved than you had originally perceived to be the case when you began your struggle. Therefore you are faced with the need to raise your level of understanding, your level of conceptual knowledge. If you do not raise your level of understanding as the struggle expands and develops. then what began as a progressive struggle can turn into its opposite.

When the struggle which began in the South exploded all over the country, the question of racism became no longer just a regional but a national question - a question of transforming this whole nation. It has been a national question ever since; national in the sense that it involves this whole country; and national also in the sense that it embraces all the aspects of this nation. We now face the question of the Second Reconstruction of the United States. What kind of nation should the United States be? What kind, of society should we build in the United States? On what kind of philosophy concerning relations between people should we base ourselves - because no movement can ever develop momentum without a philosophy.

Note that I used the word "we." I mean "we." The strength of the movement that began in the South stemmed from the fact that those who led and participated in it understood that blacks had to change this society - this country. They had many illusions about the possibilities of reforming this society, but at least they did not have the romantic and escapist notions about leaving this country to make the revolution in Africa which nationalists of today have. However, once the movement came North and the tremendous complexity of the struggle that would be necessary to transform this whole society began to dawn on blacks, all kinds of romantic and escapist notions began to develop within the black movement. These romantic and escapist notions are now crippling the minds of many of our black young people.

All kinds of black militants call themselves black revolutionists these days. But few of them have yet been willing to come face to face with the contradiction that, just as it has been on the backs of the black masses that this society has advanced economically at such tremendous speed, so it is only under the revolutionary political leadership of black people that this country will be able to get out of its contradictions. We are hesitant to face up to this truth because it is too challenging. We have the fears which always haunt the revolutionary social forces, the fear of not knowing whether we can win; the fear that if we set our sights too high we may provoke the enemy to counterattack; the lack of confidence in ourselves and in our ability to struggle to create a better society. This is not a fear that is unique to blacks. All revolutionary social forces have this fear as they come face to face

with their real conditions of life and the growing realization that they must assume revolutionary responsibility for changing the whole society - so that their lives as well as those of others in this society can be fundamentally changed. Because the fear is so great, it becomes much easier to evade the tremendous challenge and responsibility for disciplined scientific thinking and disciplined political organization which are necessary to lead revolutionary struggles.

Confronted with this political challenge many of those who have been frustrated by the failure of the civil rights movement and the succeeding rebellions to solve all our problems have begun to put forward all kinds of fantastic ideas as to what we should now do. Some say we should separate and return to Africa. Some say we should separate but remain here and try to build a new black capitalist economy from scratch inside the most advanced and powerful capitalist economy in the world. Some say we should join the Pan-African movement of the African people in Africa and build a military base in Africa from which we will eventually be able to attack the United States.

Others say we should just struggle for survival from day to day, doing whatever has to be done for survival. They have just given up struggling for anything at all and have turned to astrology or drugs or religion - in the old-time belief that some metaphysical force out there in the twilight zone will rescue us from our dilemma. And finally most black militants of the 1960s, even while they are still talking their nationalist rhetoric, have today just become a part of the system. They are doing their best to get to the top in one form or another, regardless of whom they have to step on to get there, just as every other ethnic group has always done in this country.

THE AMERICAN SYSTEM: INCORPORATION OF ETHNIC GROUPS

Those who have given a great deal to a particular struggle in the past always find it hard to realize that what began as a struggle for equal justice, equal representation or equal rights, can, precisely because it gains momentum, become just another factor in the development of the system. A system doesn't have any color. It is a way of social functioning which not only has institutions and structure but also has an ideology and the tendency to perpetuate itself. In the United States the capitalist system functions not only by exploitation of different groups but also by incorporation of successive ethnic groups into the system. This is the way that it has historically transformed what might become antagonistic social forces into non-antagonistic social forces. Already we have seen how American labor has been incorporated into the system in the wake of the militant labor struggles of the 1930s. Instead of being a threat to the system as it used to be, labor now helps the system to function. Labor keeps demanding more for itself in the way of more wages, pensions and other benefits and doesn't give a damn if this "more" is extracted out of the superexploitation of people in other parts of the world or passed on to the consumer. In this

way the labor organizations which came out of the great social struggles of the 1930s and 1940s are today just mainstays of capitalism itself. They not only act as obstacles to its overthrow; they actively keep the system going.

The black movement is now running a parallel course. Gradually blacks are being incorporated into the structures, the institutions and the ideology of U.S. capitalism. This is happening because, in the wake of the black rebellions of the 1960s, the black movement has made no serious effort to repudiate the bourgeois method of thought on which U.S. capitalism is based which involves each individual or group just getting more for itself. It has made no serious effort to create a movement based on a more advanced method of thinking and which aims to transform the whole of society for the benefit of the majority of the population.

It would be childish to blame U.S. capitalism for incorporating blacks into the system. In doing this, the system is only doing what it is supposed to do in order to maintain itself. In this respect U.S. capitalism is doing and has done very well. From the time of the Johnson administration tens of thousands of black militants, who might have become revolutionists, have been incorporated into various pacification programs. Scholarships were made available on a mass basis to blacks so that they could go to college and become part of that huge apparatus of social workers and teachers which keeps the system going. Now we have blacks in every sphere of capitalist society—junior executives of corporations, local and national politicians, mayors and judges, sheriffs and policemen. Blacks have acquired the same entourage of officials which every other ethnic group has. In this sense blacks have risen in the sliding scale of upward mobility just as the Kerner Commission proposed. They have not supplanted or replaced whites. But as whites have been elevated upwards, blacks have replaced them on the levels which they vacated. Hence today blacks are taking over the cities in the traditional pattern of other ethnic groups.

In the past, as we pointed out in *The City is The Black Man's Land*, this upward mobility in the politics of the city had stopped at blacks. But after the rebellions U.S. capitalism was ready to make this concession. just as it incorporated labor after the class struggles of the 30s, it has now incorporated blacks in the wake of the racial struggles of the 60s.

Today blacks are inheriting the old cities which are more poverty-stricken and crime-ridden than they have ever been. Technology has made it possible for capitalism not to depend on the city any more as the main base for its production facilities. So industry is abandoning the cities for the rural areas with the same ease that in the 19th century it abandoned the rural areas for the cities. It is in the rural areas that U.S. capitalism is developing the new technical industries, leaving behind the cities to be fought over by petty-bourgeois careerists, whites and blacks. These blacks and whites can't do anything to restore the cities which have become little more than urban reservations. All that is happening is that

thousands of careerist blacks are getting plush jobs for themselves and living high on the hog. But the cities continue to deteriorate.

THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN 'TWO ROADS

In *The American Revolution* I pointed out that there are two sides to every question -but only one side is right. There are many ways that we can look at what is happening in this country today. But in the end we are going to have to recognize that we now have only the choice between two roads for the movement - only two directions of thought and action.

Will the United States continue to be a society based on the bourgeois system of upward mobility, with each rebellious group becoming incorporated into the system through its careerist or opportunist members, while the mass at the bottom sinks deeper into despair? Or can we build a society in this country based upon social responsibility between individuals and between groups in which everyone tries to make decisions based on the interests of the whole rather than on the special interest of his or her ethnic group?

The black movement started out in the belief that racism was the only contradiction in this society and that if it could only win equal opportunity for blacks to advance in the system, blacks and whites would end up equal. In the course of two decades of struggle, i.e. in the course of social practice, it has become clear that racism is not the sole contradiction and that it is inseparable from the capitalist contradictions which arise from each group advancing at the expense of others and individuals within each group using the group to advance themselves..

The more nationalistic the black movement has become, the easier it has been for U.S. capitalism to incorporate blacks into the system. Not only has it been easy for the system to identify the individuals to be incorporated. But the more nationalistic blacks became, the more they began to fool themselves and allow themselves to be fooled by black opportunist leaders into believing that everything black is beautiful and everything non-black is ugly or worthless or a threat to blacks. More and more blacks began to think and insist that "all we care about are blacks - and the hell with everybody else." Thus step by step they have taken on the dehumanized ideology of U.S. capitalism.

Thus, in the course of only twenty years, both the integrationists, who only wanted to reform the system so that blacks could be included in capitalist exploitation, and the nationalists, who claimed to be against the system, have each gradually been brought into the system and are assuming responsibility for it and the chaos which has been created as a result of the system.

The nationalists ended up by going into the system because they made the mistake of

thinking that nationalism in and of itself is a revolutionary ideology, when in fact nationalism is only a stage in the development of a struggle by an oppressed people. , It is the stage when all layers of an oppressed group - the petty-bourgeoisie, workers, peasants, farmers- come to the conclusion that they have shared a common oppression and have a common history.

In the United States nationalism was an inevitable stage in the development of black struggle because throughout the history of this country, blacks have been kept at the bottom of this society as blacks, i.e. on a racial basis. But ever since the black power movement erupted in the late 1960s, the question facing the black movement has been not the past but the future. The question has become "What are we going to do about the future of this country, this society? What kind of society must we create here in this country for our children and our children's children?"

In other words, from the time that the nationalist or black power stage erupted in this country, the need has been for blacks to develop a revolutionary ideology for this country. But instead of doing this, black militants began to look towards Africa and towards the past; in other words, to a world that they really couldn't do anything about. Instead of grappling with the tremendous challenge of transforming the conditions and relations in this country, they began to idealize the past. Instead of examining the changes that would have to be made in this country - which would inevitably benefit not only blacks but everybody else in this country - they began to think of themselves as living in some metaphysical space totally separate and apart from everybody else and what was happening in this country. They began to insist that blacks in this country are Third World people. They refused to face the reality that black GIs were raping and massacring the people of Vietnam just like white GIs. Or that blacks are an integral part of that 5% of the world's population living in the United States and using up 40% of the world's energy resources for their big cars and their new appliances, just as whites are doing.

Unwilling to face their actual conditions of life inside this country and the challenge of bringing about fundamental changes in this country, blacks have drifted steadily into bourgeois methods of thinking and bourgeois practices. The result is that today blacks are no different from whites in seeking individual advancement based upon the capitalist principle that every individual can "make it" in the system, if only they are ready to use others to get there, exploiting even those closest to them in the most degrading ways, from the pimp on the street to the politician seeking office. Meanwhile, instead of confronting this growing criminal mentality among black people, black militants have been making excuses for it — thus helping this criminal mentality to become even more widespread among black children and youth.

Today, in the year 1974, blacks all over the country are bragging about how many black

mayors have been elected, while practically every black who can get together a few hundred dollars is running for one office or another. In terms of numbers this looks like progress for black people. But in terms of grappling with the fundamental issues that confront this country and everyone inside it, including blacks, (crime, the energy crisis, the corruption at all levels of government) this rush of black politicians only means that more blacks are now caught up in the system of bourgeois politics. Just like white politicians they cannot raise any of the real questions which confront this country and force the American people and those who might elect them to office, i.e. their own constituents, to discuss and clarify their positions on them. If they did this, they might not get elected to office, which is their main aim. So black politicians are now making deals to please the most voters - just as white politicians have been doing for the last hundred years. Thus the elevation of blacks into the system has weakened the black movement and the overall struggle for real change in this country - even tho on the surface it may seem to have strengthened it. In this sense, even if we took the process to the logical conclusion of electing a black president and vice-president, all it would mean would be trapping more blacks in the position of defending and projecting the practices and ideology of the system.

LEARNING FROM SOCIAL PRACTICE

There is no use wondering what might have happened differently. Now we must try to learn from what has happened. There is a good side to this. Now that blacks have been incorporated into the bourgeois practices of this country, the fundamental issue facing blacks is much clearer than it could possibly have been twenty years ago. It is easier for young people to see now that blacks, like everybody else in this country, now only have the choice between two roads

Either you can join those blacks who are now rushing in to defend and expand a system which is based upon the exploitation of the many for the benefit of a few. Or you can take the socialist direction which has as its aim to create a society based on advancing the many and all Mankind, above the interests of a few.

In making this choice, those who are ready to take responsibility for changing society in the direction of a socialist society can't start by taking a poll of the masses. Nor can they just wait for the masses to rebel and then rush in to become their spokesman, which is what most of the black militants of the 60s did.-, Like all masses the black masses are full of internal contradictions. They can only acquire the strength to fight against the external enemy by first struggling against their own internal contradictions and limitations. No potential revolutionary social force has ever become an actual revolutionary social force except through struggle to overcome its limitations and weaknesses.

Through past struggles blacks have rid themselves of physical fears standing in the way of

struggles against oppression. This is the first obstacle which any oppressed group has to overcome - an obstacle which is usually overcome through mass rebellions. Now the great need is for blacks to rid themselves of the fear of theoretical and political struggles against their own limitations. This requires a different kind of courage and boldness. It also requires discipline and patience and a readiness to struggle to acquire an appreciation of the dialectical process by which development takes place.

Our first need now is to look critically at the past of the black movement of the 50s and 60s, not in order to blame black leaders for what they did not do or to dream about what might have been if somebody had done differently - but rather to prepare for the next stage of struggle.

Black intellectuals especially must be ready to look very critically at how quick they were to accept the idea that there is such a thing as "black thought," i.e. that thought is based on color or biology rather than on the creative use of the mind to analyze historical and social developments and to project new directions for an actual society. By accepting the idea that biology is the basis for thinking, black intellectuals have not only crippled their own minds but also the minds of millions of young people - until today few blacks know how to think historically or to make social judgments based on anything else but color. With every day the thinking among black youth becomes more anti-historical, more metaphysical and more superstitious and therefore more vulnerable to manipulation by unscrupulous demagogues and the mass media. The reality, the very sad reality today is that most of our young people have no basis for making decisions except their own momentary feelings, their own immediate

selfish interest or their desire not to be unpopular with their peers. Every day black youth are becoming more individualistic, more pleasure-seeking, more unable to tell the difference between correct and incorrect ideas and principles.

That is why the responsibility of black intellectuals, and especially those of you who are in the field of political science, is so great. You have the responsibility to acquire, to develop a method of thought that is based upon the historical developments and contradictions of this society in this country. You now have the tremendous advantage of the experiences of the last 20 years - both good and bad - to evaluate. In this sense you are very fortunate.

Not all black intellectuals are going to be ready to accept this responsibility. Many, perhaps most of them, will continue to be prisoners of bourgeois thought, i.e. they will be concerned only with advancing their own careers and the careers of their cronies, just as white intellectuals have been. More and more black politicians are going to win elections in the next few years; therefore it will seem to most of you foolish not to jump on their bandwagons or create a bandwagon of your own. But in thinking and acting this way, you

will only become like so many black prime ministers in the West Indies and in the tiny African nations of our time - enjoying their own pomp and circumstance and begging whites to come to your city to spend their tourist dollars, so that you can entertain them with African dances as the native Americans entertain tourists with Indian dances.

My hope, however, is that some of you will be ready to accept the challenge I put to you - to be ready to struggle to think dialectically. That is, we must be ready to recognize that as reality changes, our ideas have to change so that we can project new, more advanced aspirations worth striving for. This is the only way to avoid becoming prisoners of ideas which were once progressive but have become reactionary, i.e. have been turned into their opposite. The only struggles worth pursuing are those which advance the whole society and enable all human beings to evolve to a new and higher stage of their human potential.

Knowledge must move from perception to conception,; in other words, knowledge and struggle begin by perceiving your own reality. But it must have the aim of developing beyond what you yourself or your own group can perceive, to wider conceptions that are based upon the experiences of the whole history of Mankind. The only way that anyone can take this big step of moving beyond perception to conception is by recognizing and struggling against your own internal contradictions and weaknesses. Of these weaknesses, the most fundamental and most difficult to overcome, as a result of the specific history of United States society, is the tendency not to think at all but simply to react in terms of individual or ethnic self-interest.