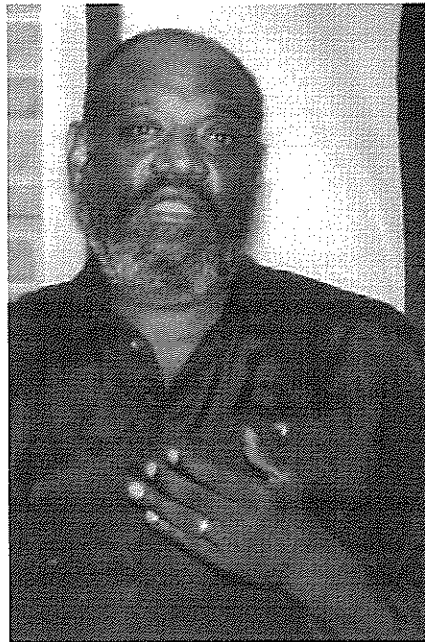


Darcus Howe on

"The inevitable revolt"

Darcus Howe is an activist, one-time British Black Panther and presenter of the *Devil's Advocate* series on television. He spoke to Mark Osborn about the Panthers' legacy and black politics in America.



DH: THE Panthers have been grossly misrepresented in political circles. The Black Panther Party was an intensely revolutionary organisation. They were the largest non-establishment political party ever to exist in America — larger than the Communist Party or any left-wing group. There were thousands of them all over the United States.

The members put themselves on the line. They staked their lives in order to get change in the United States.

For me the three great figures of the twentieth century are Lenin, Mao and Malcolm X. With each of these leaders a new class moved forward: Lenin led the workers, Mao led the peasants and the modern unemployed came on to the historical stage led by Malcolm X.

The first time we saw it was when Malcolm X surrounded the police station in Harlem. Then we could see the unemployed: who are these people? what do they want?

Lenin was not a worker and Mao was not a peasant. But one of the most important things about Malcolm, Huey P Newton and George Jackson was that they were from the urban unemployed. For the first time in history the class produced its own leaders. That to me is another strength. The Panthers were deeply rooted in the black, urban unemployed.

People learned to read and write in jail. Stokely Carmichael and James Forman were perhaps some of the few who were educated people. A lot were just street guys and the only discipline came from the *Little Red Book*. They were Maoists.

MO: I can't be expected to like Mao — given that he killed and jailed people like

me. But Mao did have the big political picture. The Panthers didn't.

DH: Oh, but they did! They had a great conception of international revolution.

They had no power other than that of the gun. They could not go out on strike. Their moral code and behaviour cut them off from the bible-toting mass of black workers.

In some places there were wonderful alliances. In Detroit, where the black working class was strong in the factories, they had links with the workers. In California they aligned with hippy students. The state came down on all of them.

They did some remarkable things. They challenged the Democratic Party at their Chicago convention. They terrified the establishment.

MO: Lenin developed a sophisticated world view. Huey Newton did not. The Panthers were tremendously brave and heroic but I'm not going to pretend they were very political. They had a 10 point Programme, but how would it be carried out?

DH: No, that's not right at all. Huey quoted Lenin a great deal. Their problem was this: they thought that the unemployed youth were the class to lead the revolution. And that was an enormous mistake. They substituted a section of the class for the whole class.

The unemployed are not only just a part of the working class but are also a very vulnerable section of the class. They are not disciplined by production, and live from

day-to-day making a living in any way they can.

Ten guys would be hustling in a syndicate. The police hold one, give him thousands of dollars and the rest go to jail. Or he sets them up to get killed. That's how they live. And the Panthers could never transcend that.

MO: When Lenin was alive there was no cult of Lenin. But when Huey Newton was the Panthers leader there was a cult of Huey. There was also a cult of the gun and the cult of violence.

DH: The cult of the gun is easily explainable. If you were shot at every day, what would you do? The Panthers had no other alternative.

MO: Lenin and the Bolsheviks faced White armies and armies of intervention

DH: Not day-to-day. They faced it as a political struggle.

MO: For Lenin the use of violence was subordinate to political ends: human liberation. The Panthers glorified violence. It was part of their political character.

DH: Lenin as an individual did not face the police shooting at him every day.

Police brutality was part of the Panthers' cultural life. I can easily understand how they felt. You have to understand that! They were faced with a military struggle.

MO: But such a struggle could not win.

DH: It didn't win. That's a fact. Hoover and the FBI destroyed them with the Cointelpro programme.

MO: I understand why they reacted like this. But take the question of violence. The Bolsheviks settled their disputes by argument. The Panthers regularly solved arguments amongst themselves with violence.

DH: I'm not picking an argument with you. I just think it is ahistorical and facile to look back with hindsight and say that. That's just how they were!

The Panthers were central to the period following the break up of feudalism in the Southern States of America. And for me it remains one of the most important historical landmarks in American politics.

Theirs seems to be a tradition that has died forever. I don't think it has. It is a tradition which has gone to sleep for a while, but will emerge again. It will be wiser and stronger as a result of the Panther experience.



Working-class Afro-Americans can expect little but trouble in their lives

The Panthers in Britain

MO: When you interviewed Leonard Jeffries on *The Devil's Advocate* you seemed to use criticisms that Huey Newton used against the cultural nationalists: that if black people are good and white people are bad then that lets Papa Doc and African dictators off the hook. Is this where you got that from?

DH: I was part of forming that conception. I was one of the most listened to leaders amongst black people in Britain at the time — especially young blacks.

I was an overseas member of the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC), which I joined in the late 1960s.

The Panthers were set up in London in the early '70s. We took their name. We took their dress. We had a 10 Point pro-

gramme. But we were not Maoists.

We expelled and suspended people for being Maoists. We thought they were divisive. We did not have cultural nationalists. And we were not with the Labour Party either! We had some relations with the IMG.

In the Panthers there were various currents. But there was a very powerful leadership. Members could not just go around doing what they wanted — unless you were George Jackson, perhaps the brightest of them all.

I spoke on platforms alongside Stokely Carmichael, Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver as the UK representative. So I knew the organisation pretty well.

MO: Did you have links with Elridge Cleaver in Algeria?

DH: No. We did not go with Elridge. We were with Huey. Elridge had become very erratic by then. I've a great place in my heart for Huey. The failure of a great organisation like the Panthers left its mark. The pressure he was under as a result of the defeat broke him.

He was such a nice young fellow. The drugs he took was a long time after the Panthers had collapsed.

MO: What were the London Panthers like?

DH: We had about 250 members. But there was no question about seizing power — as they put it in the US.

The slogan was: Come what may we're here to stay! That was the battle as we defined it. We wanted an end to the police harassing us: very specific demands. It was not a national struggle.

We wanted a bit more space and more democratic rights within the country.

This was not just an organisation of Africans and people from the Caribbean. Farukh Dhondy was on the central committee. We had quite a number of Asians and strong relations with the Indian Work-

ers Association.

The struggle in America

MO: What about the limitations of this type of organisation? The Panthers were based on a minority — the lumpen youth — of a minority community.

DH: Using the term minority is very dangerous. Until 1959 the South existed on serfdom and the cotton economy. Then they discovered synthetic fibres. The cotton plantation owners had to intensify pressure on the serfs.

And when I say "serf" I mean it accu-

"There have been many slogans in world history. Of them all I think Black Power is one of the best."

rately. The serfs worked for the landowner. And the landowner was helped by the local power structure.

We could not vote. We were not allowed to, because in many areas we were in the majority: during the Reconstruction period after the Civil War we had had our own representatives elected to Congress.

That is how millions lived in the South.

Then black people simply started walking off the land, helped by black and white students from the North.

Everyone says it was just Martin Luther-King. Not so! There were mass revolts from below — mass desertions directed against the landowners. Tent cities were set up — people would rather live in tents than accept any more from the landowners.

The whole system was broken up by 1959 — this system which had been destroyed elsewhere a long time before had lasted in the United States for 14 years after World War 2 had ended! ↓

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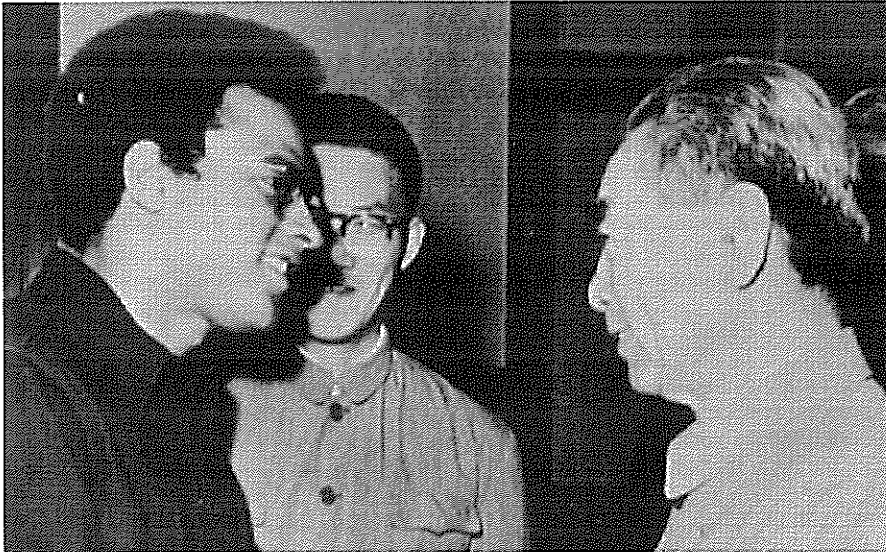
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Louis Farrakhan



Huey Newton meets Chou En-Lai

MO: But the whole drive of the mass movement was towards the demand for full rights as Americans — Fredrick Douglass's demand.

DH: I would not even go back to Fredrick Douglass. The landowner says you owe a thousand dollars after you have been picking cotton. Revolt was inevitable. The slogan was Black Power.

MO: But the Black Power slogan only came in '66. But what did it mean? I understand the demand for the right to vote. But Stokely Carmichael meant more by Black Power than that. But the demand was so unclear that anyone could be for Black Power — Nixon was for Black Power in 1968 — he meant black capitalism.

DH: There have been many slogans in world history. Of them all I think Black Power is one of the best. You had to be there to experience Black Power. It was



Stokely Carmichael was one of the few educated leaders of the "Black Power" movement in the USA.

simply a nationalist struggle — the same as the struggle in Ghana or in India — it was just a demand for control over your own life.

MO: The French were a privileged minority in Algeria — someone else's country — and the British were the same in India. But the Black Americans were firstly — basically — Americans and secondly a minority.

DH: The French ruled in Algeria, the blacks did not rule anywhere.

MO: The struggles were not the same. The question in Algeria was self-government for the Algerians. The matter was not self-government for Black Americans.

DH: Oh yes it was! Alabama, Mississippi and Atlanta are now ruled by Blacks. Now the whole situation is exposed: black people are divided into classes.

MO: Atlanta's government is now elected by the people, not by blacks or whites, but by people.

DH: The people who rule now in Atlanta are the black middle class. So they build an airport in Atlanta and give their friends big kick-backs.

So, now working class blacks are in a position to see that "Black" is not an all-embracing definition. That could not been seen if all that existed was a black barbers or corner shop. Now there are black multi-millionaires.

MO: So your argument is that this nationalist struggle was necessary in order to clear the way for class politics.

DH: Absolutely correct!

Looking forward

MO: THE important thing now is what the next stage will lead to. Farrakhan is due to lead a march on Washington in October. He is looking to repeat the 1963 March on Washington which took place in the middle of the Civil Rights struggle.

But the situation today does not com-

pare. In 1963 there was such a fervour in America.

Isn't the tragedy that Martin Luther-King and the Civil Rights movement have been replaced by Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam (NOI). King was a great man, a leader of a mass movement for equality. The NOI are awful, right-wing bigots.

DH: You never know what goes on in an organisation though.

I am an atheist and I can't deal with some of his views.

Nevertheless he can fill stadiums in the US...

MO: Yes, but with what politics!

DH: It indicates that people want to move. And that is positive. Be certain that Black people in America will transcend Farrakhan.

MO: It is a bizarre situation: here is a man that was — almost certainly — directly involved in the assassination of Malcolm X, leading thousands of young black people whose main hero is Malcolm X!

DH: Almost certainly? Certainly!

But things will work themselves out. The leaders are not the mass.

Farrakhan is in one sense moderate.

MO: Kballid Muhammad is a terrible, demagogic anti-semitic man!

DH: Yes, he's a fascist. And more than that their whole programme is right wing.

But they've been challenged before. Malcolm X challenged them. They kicked him out and killed him.

So, don't despair of black people in the United States! The Panthers, Martin Luther-King and Malcolm X transformed America in a way that Eisenhower, Nixon and Reagan never did.

Martin Luther-King, under pressure of the mass, moved to the left. At the end of his life he was supporting workers' struggles — and that is when they killed him.

A lot of people living in the United States are not American in the way that blacks are. There are three real sets of Americans: the Native Americans, the blacks and the white descendants of the people who came over in the Mayflower.

Black people built the US and they have a sense that they did.

The OJ Simpson trial has focused on the US as nothing else. It is a focus because he is black. The impact of the case is electric. That indicates that black people are still at the centre of American life.

MO: But the striking thing about that trial is the way people are lining up on race lines about whether they believe OJ Simpson is guilty or not. It seems clear that the policemen — Fuhrman — is a racist. It also seems very likely that OJ Simpson is guilty...

DH: I don't know that at all. You will never get me to say that.

But lining up on race lines is just the way in the United States. What do you expect me to do about that!

It is worth making the point that blacks are constantly fighting that. It faces them every day.

MO: *The good thing about Martin Luther-King is that he stood out against this. He wanted people to be treated as human beings — as distinct to some of the more radical nationalist currents who wanted to stress and cultivate existing black-white divisions.*

In between Martin Luther-King and the other end of the spectrum of black politics — the cultural nationalists — you have the Panthers and Malcolm X after '64.

DH: And Darcus Howe. I am irredeemably black. I do not exploit it for political ends. But I am aware of black struggle. If I was not aware of it I would die.

The people who work for me on my television series *The Devil's Advocate* are black and white. But they are aware I am aware of race.

"I am irredeemably black. I do not exploit it for political ends. But I am aware of black struggle. If I was not aware of it I would die."

MO: *I did an interview with you before and what you said was: I'm black, I'm comfortable, and don't give me any trouble because I'm black. It seems a good way of saying it.*

DH: But in America blacks are always being given trouble. Have you lived there? You talk about the States with a British sensibility, which is a serious problem.

There are millions of blacks in the United States who do not meet whites at all, except the police. They have no relations with whites, they have no white friends, they do not live in the same areas.

When you say "black community" in the US, you mean exactly that.

I go to Bed-Stuy a few times each year and don't see a white person in Brooklyn, except for a cop passing in a car. None.

If you walk down the street in Manhattan, at night, and a white woman sees you walking towards you, she bolts!

In Harlem you may see one or two whites, because there is a cultural space there — but not after 5 o'clock.

There are myths on both sides. But when one side has the power, the myths can be established for real.

MO: *It's a mess*

DH: Yes, an enormous mess.

And the result is that America has lost out. A lot of the enormous creative power of black people has been lost to America. ■

The trial of the Mangrove Nine

As we were saying...

By Constance Lever

THE OLD Bailey trial of the Mangrove Nine in 1971 took the fight of Notting Hill's black community against police harassment right into the nerve-centre of the British legal system.

With the unexpected help of a mainly white, working class jury, the Nine won a partial victory: they were cleared of 25 out of 31 charges — including the serious ones of riot, and causing grievous bodily harm. 5 were acquitted and 4 got suspended sentences.

In June and July 1970 the Mangrove Restaurant was raided nine times by the police, supposedly looking for drugs, which they never found. Its licence to stay open after 11pm was revoked when the police lodged an objection. Thereafter, those who ran it were repeatedly dragged into court accused of serving food after hours.

On 9 August 1970 local black people marched in protest at this police harassment. Without "provocation" police baton-charged the march. Naturally the marchers fought back. The charges — which were later insisted upon by higher police authorities —

arose from this battle. The harassment by the police bully boys is not accidental. The police must protect the private property system of the wealthy against its victims. To forestall trouble they tend to pick most on those who stand out, who have the rawest deal, and try to terrorise them into submission.

The Mangrove was a community restaurant, one of a network of community organisations. The restaurant its clientele were harassed so as to stamp out a centre of black consciousness.

The trial itself was not quite what the police had bargained for. The accused turned the trial into an indictment of the police and the system. Three of them, Darcus

Howe, Rhodan Gordon and Althea Lecointe, conducted their own defence. They all refused to shut up when told to and rejected the judge's rulings that statements about police brutality in Notting Hill were irrelevant.

The Mangrove Nine refused to behave as individuals charged with crimes, unsure and apologetic but acted instead as representatives of a militant black community challenging police and court intimidations. And their community back them up: every day of the 49-day trial they packed the public gallery to give solidarity.

With these tactics they broke through the hidebound ritual of court procedure and managed to actually talk about their lives and experiences and about their conflict with the police, to the ordinary men and women of the jury.

A majority of the Mangrove jury were workers, and only two of the 11 were black. It is known that the jury divided along class lines, with the middle class members inclined to believe the police and favouring conviction. It seems that some of the workers knew better and simply decided the police were liars. Eventually they compromised on the basis of agreement on acquittal on the most serious charges.

And when the trial ended, 7 jurors joined the Nine to spend 3 hours chatting and drinking like old friends, long kept apart. But only partial victories can be won in the courts. The police and the state retaliate.

Within 24 hours of his acquittal, Rhodan Gordon was rearrested on charges of obstructing and assaulting the police.

What is needed is a drive to mobilise the active support of the labour movement for the struggles of black people. It would be pointless and stupid to deny the widespread racist attitudes in the labour movement. It is the job of socialists to fight to break this down — not to pretend working class racialism doesn't exist.

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