

Death, US Capitalism and Black Panther Party Founder Huey Newton's Theory of Suicide

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Image: Huey P. Newton, African-American activist co-founder of the Black Panther Party with Bobby Seale in 1966.

Class and race oppression brings death by many means. "The person or movement partaking in revolutionary suicide has chosen to confront death by fighting for liberation."

Death is central to the US capitalist system, especially in the form of state-sponsored murder. Without the murderous invasions, coups, and mercenary wars conducted by the US capitalist state and its allied countries, the entire system of finance speculation and profit accumulation would come undone. Mass murder is "collateral damage" for securing markets, resources, geopolitical hegemony, and thus profit, for the capitalist class. This form of death is overlooked and understudied despite its centrality to the historical development of the United States. The US project itself would not have been possible without murder in the name of capitalism.

The Euro-colonization of the Western hemisphere required the murder of indigenous peoples, and subsequently, the enslavement of Black Africans. Following the establishment of the US government, a rapid period of industrialization produced a powerful capitalist class. This capitalist class was special, for its entire existence depended not upon a transition from a feudal economic base, but rather from the stolen labor and wealth of enslaved Africans and slaughtered indigenous peoples. US colonialism continued into Mexico, Latin America, and western North America, displacing and eliminating native peoples to establish an industrial capitalist empire. The Civil War and the two World Wars that followed were indicative of the capitalist system's tendency to monopolize after bloody wars of competition for colonial possessions. When the US emerged as the capitalist superpower after the World Wars ravaged the European capitalist system, the stage was set for the transition from industrial capitalism to finance capitalism. Since 1945, millions more have perished from US imperial incursions on sovereignty in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and Asia on behalf of Wall Street and its international organizations: the World Bank, IMF, and World Trade Organization

Of course, a complete analysis of the murderous nature of US capitalism honors the resistance of its victims. However many hundreds of millions, maybe billions, of people have been forced into premature death, it is critical we remember and learn from past and present freedom fighters. Whether examining the resistance of slave rebellions in colonized North America or the socialist revolutions in China, Cuba, and Vietnam, the US ruling class has never experienced a day without a fight from workers, peasants, and nations exploited

by the capitalist system. The study and practice of resistance has the profound effect of transforming our collective consciousness toward all aspects of humanity, including death.

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Huey Newton, one of the founding leaders of the Oakland Black Panther Party (BPP), brought death and revolutionary activity together in his analysis of suicide. The BPP organized to unite the Black community against the forces that oppressed them in the United States and the world. Huey Newton's theory of suicide was informed by his experience as a historically enslaved and exploited subject of Black America, as well as the US government's response to Black resistance. As the Panthers organized self-defense initiatives and grassroots "survival" programs, the US government worked in collusion with local police departments to destroy the Party. The FBI's COINTEPRO infiltrated every chapter of the BPP, murdering or imprisoning much of its leadership. To this day, Black Panther members like Mumia Abu Jamal remain in prison while the Black population outside the walls experiences murder every 28 hours by some form of law enforcement. This is the context in which Newton produced a theory of suicide that redefined the experience of death for the purposes of revolutionary change.

Newton's examination brought him to analyze two forms of suicide: reactionary suicide and revolutionary suicide. Reactionary suicide is most commonly known as the act of killing oneself. The indignities of US capitalism produce severe internal strife. Racism and patriarchy exacerbates class exploitation and tears apart communities. Reactionary suicide peaks during capitalist economic crises and imperialist wars, where economic conditions and trauma are most severe. Huey Newton understood that Black America was a dispossessed community whose wealth, culture, and history were stolen as a result of racist and capitalist exploitation. This historical condition increased the tendency of reactionary suicide in the Black community. Thus, Newton and the BPP leadership organized with the intent of empowering the Black community through collective work. Each concrete medical clinic, free breakfast program, and Panther school were organized to move community to confront the racist, capitalist power structure and embrace revolutionary socialism and communalism. The BPP concluded that only confidence, discipline, and concrete political education could build a powerful movement against the forces that cause reactionary suicide.

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Revolutionary suicide, in contrast, develops out of the recognition that one is a "doomed man" after making the conscious choice to participate in the struggle for self-determination and freedom. Newton's theory of revolutionary suicide placed the utmost importance not on death itself, but how it occurs. US government repression killed many Black Panther Party members in an attempt to weaken the growing spirit of resistance in the Black community. Newton's theory of revolutionary suicide connected suicide and death to the fight for a dignified, collective humanity. The person or movement partaking in revolutionary suicide has chosen to confront death by fighting for liberation. Those who commit revolutionary suicide live on through the concrete fight for freedom, self-determination, socialism and Black Power. In other words, a revolutionary can be killed, but not the revolution

Huey Newton's work on suicide was produced in a period of time where revolutionary upheaval was at a high point in the US. Today, we must find a way to apply theories of suicide and pre-mature death in a way that fights the forces that cause them. The potential of being brutally murdered by US imperialism while we struggle to meet our individual and collective needs creates the perfect conditions for reactionary suicide. The US ruling class exploits feelings of purposelessness, depression, and confusion to manufacture consent to their rule. Death and suicide are two of the most uncomfortable, yet inevitable, consequences of US capitalism. However, as Huey Newton teaches us, to confront the meaning of our mortality in the face of a powerful enemy can give us positive direction in the fight to free ourselves from the chains of this system.

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