

MALCOLM X

DIDN'T DISH OUT

FREE BEAN PIES

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DISTINGUISHING CHARITY
AND SOCIAL WORK FROM
REVOLUTIONARY STRATEGY

In the 1990s, aside from militant protests and a willingness to go head-to-head with riot police perhaps best exemplified in the 1999 protests that shut down the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, anarchists also carried out their own forms of social programs intended to meet people's needs. When the black bandanas came off, 1990s anarchists in the US were growing vegetables in "guerrilla gardens" and offering vegetarian meals to the homeless through local chapters of Food Not Bombs. The guerrilla gardens never seemed to bear fruit when it came to establishing connections with and providing food for the communities in which they were located (and nowadays city governments often fund official community garden programs). Food Not Bombs varied considerably from city to city, but some chapters did forge connections with homeless people, and its actions politicized the question of hunger and access to food.¹

Founded in 1980 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Food Not Bombs was guided by a simple but compelling political message concentrated in its name: military funding in service of imperialist wars was enormous while, even in the imperialist heartland, people went hungry. This political exposure of hunger and imperialism was delivered alongside an effective method of providing food for the homeless and anyone else who needed it. Food Not Bombs chapters collected food from friendly local supermarkets (often co-ops or other hippyish places) and bakeries that would have otherwise been thrown away due to its impending expiration date, cooked hot meals with it in a donated space (someone's house, a church, etc.), and made this food available in a public location outside once a week or more. The food was all vegetarian, partially because collecting and cooking meat that was past its prime would have sooner or later resulted in gastric disaster, and partially because many participants in Food Not Bombs were vegetarian. Food

¹ This is an admittedly reductive account of 1990s anarchists in the US, who were widely varied and carried out many other forms of activity. In addition, it's worth pointing out that there were a few other political forces at the time willing to throw down in confrontations with the police, most notably the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade.



An early Food Not Bombs confrontation with San Francisco police in 1988 resulted in the arrests of nine activists, including Keith McHenry.

Not Bombs made its food available without the typical “server” and “served” distinction and without securing permits, and turned its food distribution into political events.

This act of defiance—giving out free food without government permission, in ways that went against the typical charity model, and was connected to a critique of US militarism and the profit-driven food industry—sometimes resulted in police repression. After setting up a Food Not Bombs chapter in San Francisco in the late 1980s, Keith McHenry, one of the organization’s co-founders, was arrested over 100 times, spent over 500 nights in jail, was tortured by San Francisco Police Intelligence officers, and, by 1995, was facing 25 years to life in prison under California’s notorious Three Strikes law—all for the crime of distributing free food that would have otherwise been thrown away. For besides feeding people in need (which all sorts of charities already do), Food Not Bombs gathered homeless people together in ways that made homelessness visible and exposed how gentrification, the widespread waste of food, and

government spending on militarism resulted in hunger and even starvation right within the belly of the imperialist beast. At their best, Food Not Bombs chapters also provided a vehicle through which to mobilize homeless people to come together, discuss political questions, have public open mics, and go to protests, thus going beyond meeting people's needs and towards raising political consciousness, collectivity, and resistance.²

Today, the social programs characteristic of 1990s anarchism are being recycled in degraded and less effective forms. At times they are dressed up in communist language, including the grossly misinterpreted Maoist concept of "serve the people." Whether it takes the form of food distribution (usually *without* the robust methods of collecting donations of food that would have otherwise been discarded, gathering homeless people in public places, and politicizing hunger characteristic of Food Not Bombs), clothing drives, fixing broken tail lights, or even some types of tenant organizing, what this activity all has in common is an absence of mobilizing the masses in class struggle and a lack of raising their political consciousness beyond their immediate needs and struggles. The forms are not in any way substantially different than what is already done, often far more effectively, by churches, charities, and even the Boy Scouts of America, and attaching revolutionary slogans to social work does not alter its character.

Both 1990s anarchists and today's would-be communists or Maoists have often connected their social programs to the idea of building counter-institutions that pose alternatives to bourgeois

2 For more on Food Not Bombs, see foodnotbombs.net or CT Butler and Keith McHenry, *Food Not Bombs* (See Sharp Press, 2000). Although anarchists were deeply involved in many Food Not Bombs chapters in the 1990s, there were a variety of ideological beliefs within the decentralized organization. I am not clear on exactly how Keith McHenry chooses to represent his ideological beliefs (he's clearly not from the 1990s black-clad anarchist generation), but whatever his ideological beliefs are, I have mad respect for his firm and lifelong commitment to standing with the oppressed in the face of arrests, torture, government spying, and potential prison time.

state power and eventually bring about its collapse by subsuming it in and replacing it with bottom-up community institutions. 1990s anarchists looked to the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico as their model, while today's "Maoists" imagine their imaginary counter-institutions to be somehow akin to the strategy of protracted people's war. Whether called autonomous zones, dual power, or base areas (?!), the conception—anarchist or "Maoist"—of these counter-institutions is more or less the same, and in stark contrast to revolutionary civil war that destroys bourgeois state power, establishes a dictatorship of the proletariat, and begins the socialist transition to communism. While the counter-institution question is worth taking up in its own right, the focus of this polemic will be on the difference between social work and revolutionary strategy. I write it not because I relish knocking down the genuine but misguided efforts of comrades who are (hopefully?) trying to figure out how to overthrow US imperialism, but, in the spirit of unity-struggle-unity, because if we're serious about revolution, then we need to subject all our efforts to unsparing critique and avoid wasting time traveling down paths that have already led to failure time and time again.

Although it is rarely articulated as strategy, among people in their twenties attempting (or pretending) to be communists or Maoists today in the US, there is a fairly widespread adoption of social work and charity masquerading as revolutionary practice. The thinking goes something like this: we will meet people's needs by giving them food, clothing, etc., they will embrace us because we met their needs, and then gradually over time or when a crisis hits, they will flock to us and become revolutionaries. The Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast for Children and other social programs are often heralded as models, and the notion of "meet people's needs and then they'll join the revolution" is often confused with Mao's conception of the mass line and slogans from the Chinese revolution such as "serve the people" and "be concerned with the well-being of the masses." There appears to be very little substantive political engagement with the masses whose needs are supposedly being met, as there are rarely any reports of social investigation,

and when there are, they are usually absurd claims that the masses agreed with everything said by the “revolutionaries.” Or put more simply: most of the time, y’all ain’t even talking to the people you’re giving food to (and no, free food plus flyers with typical Leftist slogans doesn’t count).

Besides the failure to interact with and learn from the masses, there is also a lack of attempts to raise the political consciousness of the masses beyond questions pertaining to their immediate needs and carry out all-around political exposure of the system that fails to meet the needs of the masses. Given the bourgeoisie’s rather successful adoption of social programs and use of nonprofit organizations, especially since the 1960s, to take the wind out of revolutionary movements, such lack of political exposure and development of class-consciousness within these attempts to meet the needs of the masses is especially doomed to fail at revolutionary objectives even if it succeeds in its immediate goals. Moreover, in this social work model, the revolutionaries meet the needs of the masses, but the revolutionaries fail to mobilize the masses to wage class struggle to get their needs met, thus training the masses in the same passivity and powerlessness that the bourgeoisie already inculcates in them (including through its own far more effective forms of charity). Thus fundamental to charity and social work masquerading as revolutionary practice is an anti-masses and anti-vanguard outlook, and, contrary to what anarchists argue, the two go hand in hand. So let’s break down the errors behind the logic of “meet the needs of the masses and then they’ll join the revolution” in more detail, and in so doing begin to conceptualize the requirements of revolutionary strategy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

First things first, let’s acknowledge the reasons why would-be revolutionaries think that meeting the needs of the people should be the foundation of revolutionary strategy. Over the last several decades, austerity measures and automation have left large sec-

tions of people to fend for themselves, with the results including widespread homelessness and a booming illegal economy. Natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy as well as economic downturns such as those following the 2008 financial collapse and more recently the coronavirus outbreak push already desperate people over the edge and in dire need of basic necessities. It is entirely correct to see in unemployment, abandonment, and the crises on top of that possibilities for organizing people for revolution, and even correct to make meeting people's survival needs part of organizing them for revolution. How to do the latter in a way that isn't charity and really does organize people for revolution is exactly the question to figure out. Pretending that it's not a question to figure out always means resolving it in favor of charity.

Revolution is a monumental undertaking, and, especially for people without experience or connection to previous generations of revolutionaries, it's difficult to figure out where to begin. Meeting people's needs is an easy choice in part because would-be revolutionaries understandably want to do something with tangible results. We should indeed insist that our practice achieves results and isn't just spinning our wheels; this is why we need to practice Mao's four-step method, especially step three, rigorous and critical summation. But we shouldn't confuse tangible, practical results in meeting people's needs with making advances towards the revolutionary overthrow of the existing order.

Finally, in the attempts to meet people's needs is a desire to connect with the oppressed. The decision to do so with free food, however, is in part due to the would-be revolutionaries' petty-bourgeois fear of actually talking to proletarian masses, compounded by the effects of growing up on the internet. But there's no way around it: if you want to be a communist, you need to spend hours talking to the masses, getting to know them, learning how to explain your politics to them, and getting over whatever petty-bourgeois hang-ups you have about doing so. In her history of the Young Lords, Johanna Fernández explains

The Young Lords' initial forays in the community demanded courage. [Pablo "Yoruba"] Guzmán recalled the feeling: "To walk up to some strangers and just start rapping, and give 'em a leaflet—that's frightening shit." But as Guzmán explains, the Young Lords acquired mettle when they convinced Felipe Luciano to join: "Felipe had certain characteristics of discipline and toughness, and a certain kind of leadership that we needed...It was like, 'My name is Felipe Luciano, how are you doing. We're the Young Lords. You should worry about Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico is in bad shape. The barrio is in bad shape. You know why the barrio is in bad shape.' I mean, we were like, this guy is out of his mind! He was like, 'Talk to this person over there, talk to that person over here!' And that's what we needed."³

Instead of social media bravado, this is the kind of courage that is needed from today's would-be revolutionaries.

PURSUANCE (NO RESOLUTION OR PSALM HERE)

The logic behind social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing goes something like this: The masses have real survival needs (food, clothing, housing, etc.). The capitalist-imperialist system, especially with austerity measures and crises, fails to meet those needs. If us revolutionaries meet those needs, the masses will come to trust us and look to us for leadership, especially as crises get sharper and immiseration grows more acute. Since we've proven we care about them and shown that we can meet their needs while the system can't, they'll join the revolution. There are, of course, widespread variations on this logic, including the more correct point that in the course of meeting people's needs, we will get to know them and their problems and find ways to organize class struggle around their problems. And people carrying out this strategy do make some modicum of distinction between themselves and bourgeois charities by, for example, the virtue of not requiring people show

³ Johanna Fernández, *The Young Lords: A Radical History* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 95.

their IDs to receive free food. However, there are deep flaws to the basic logic.

Building a relationship with the masses premised on “we can meet your needs better than the bourgeoisie can” sets up a different form of the same old bourgeois paternalism that has long guided charities. In this relationship, the masses might like you for giving them free food and appreciate your good intentions, but there is no compelling reason for them to join you in the task of making revolution. You may develop a distorted picture of their level of agreement with you based on the fact that people receiving things they need from someone will make them more likely to agree with that someone, whether that someone is preaching Jesus or communism. Furthermore, the relationship is one of dependence on the revolutionaries (just like under bourgeois charity) rather than unleashing the conscious initiative of the masses to struggle to change their conditions.

Speaking of consciousness, the view of the masses in the social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing model is one devoid of contradiction, as though the masses are empty vessels waiting for revolutionaries to come around and save them (from austerity), filling their heads with revolutionary politics and their bellies with free food. Reality is, of course, more complicated, and the development of a revolutionary people has always involved considerable ideological struggle and the dealing with the at times sharp divisions among the masses between (from the perspective of communist revolution) the advanced, intermediate, and backward. Making social work the starting point and principal practice of revolutionary organizing always pitches to the intermediate among the masses. Furthermore, it seeks to avoid the necessary ideological struggle that must take place to bring any group of people forward into a revolutionary movement, at best imagining that such struggle can only take place after trust (specifically, trust based on a social worker relationship) has been gained by proving we can meet people’s needs. *The advanced masses are those who recognize the need for collective struggle and sacrifice against the system that is oppressing them and*

depriving them of their needs, and it is those masses who we should be aiming to organize first and foremost. There is a world of difference between “I respect you for providing me with free food” and “I am willing to risk death alongside you to overthrow the system” which the social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing model obfuscates.

Besides pitching things to the intermediate, attempting to out-do the bourgeoisie in meeting people’s needs sets up a dangerous trap for would-be revolutionaries. Given that you don’t have state power or ownership of the means of production, the bourgeoisie can in fact outstrip you in meeting people’s needs if they feel compelled to. In the US, the bourgeoisie has skillfully cultivated what the (new) Communist Party of Italy calls a *regime of preventive counterrevolution* that makes strategic use of social welfare and enlists plenty of radicals and former revolutionaries in administering that social welfare in what is often referred to as the nonprofit industrial complex. Several decades of austerity has diminished the bourgeoisie’s social welfare. But in the 1970s, in response to the growth of radical and revolutionary movements in the US, social welfare provisions were substantially expanded *by the Nixon administration*. Yes, you heard right, *the most reactionary elements among bourgeois politicians at the time other than those who were fucking Klansman provided more social welfare to the people than any other presidential administration since*. In *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*, Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin point out how, in response to the Black Panthers’ Free Breakfast for Children program, the US government expanded its own provision of free breakfasts:

The U.S. government spent only \$600,000 on breakfast programs in all of 1967. Government-sponsored breakfast programs grew rapidly as the Panthers pioneered their free breakfast program. By 1972, government-sponsored breakfast programs were feeding 1.18 million children out of the approximately 5 million who qualified for such help.⁴

4 Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin, *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press, 2014), 186.

Even more dramatic was the government response to the Young Lords' occupation of a church in East Harlem wherein one of the demands was the use of the church for a free breakfast program. Fernández explains that

[o]n the same night that the Young Lords abandoned the church [7 January 1970], Republican governor Nelson Rockefeller proposed during his State of the State address to launch a breakfast program for 35,000 poor children in the city. In response, Harlem's Democratic state senator Basil Paterson told the media, "I think the Black Panthers and the Young Lords have influenced the governor," whom he also condemned for not having any original proposals of his own.⁵

Bloom and Martin argue that increased government funding for children's breakfasts was not just a knee-jerk reaction to the growing popularity of revolutionary organizations, the success of those organizations' social programs, and an overall increasingly rebellious Black proletariat and student movement. In fact, the expansion of social welfare measures, along with the repeal of the military draft, increasing numbers of Black politicians in office, and the creation of Black Studies departments at universities (often with Ford Foundation funding), was conscious policy by sections of the bourgeoisie, including the Nixon administration. The purpose of that policy was to blunt the social antagonisms that had provided the potential for large numbers of people to support revolutionary organizations and undercut the specific tactics, such as the Black Panthers' Free Breakfast for Children program, that turned that potential into palpable support. As Bloom and Martin put it,

Nixon had long advocated jobs programs as a way to redress black radicalism. In the summer of 1967, following the massive rebellions in Newark and Detroit, Nixon took the position that "jobs is the gut issue" in racial unrest. In 1969, his first year in office, Nixon pushed through the first federal affirmative action policy, the "Philadelphia Plan," which established explicit, government-determined quotas for

5 Fernández, 191.

hiring blacks and other minorities on federally funded construction projects.⁶

Especially in the most powerful and bloodsucking imperialist empire in history, the bourgeoisie has the resources to increase its social welfare provisions when necessary to stave off rebellion, and it has learned how to do so in the course of challenges to its rule in the 1930s (the New Deal would not have been what it was without the Communist Party) and the late 1960s and codified professional nonprofit organizations to perfect this strategy over the last several decades.

Instead of dealing with the reality of the bourgeoisie's monopoly on power and resources, the social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing model imagines that you can solve the masses' problems within the realm of distribution rather than in the realm of ownership. At times absurd claims are made under this illusion, such as the idea of achieving food sovereignty in a neighborhood by community gardening on the site of a former gas station (personally, I wouldn't eat anything grown on land that gasoline has seeped into over years). It seems as though for many would-be communists, their vision of socialism is one where the mutual aid food distribution networks they are currently involved in become institutions that run the future society. At the risk of sounding like an obnoxious Trotskyite, this petty-bourgeois fantasy would perhaps best be dealt with by those under its spell getting jobs at meat packing plants or in the fields picking the vegetables and fruits that these mutual aid networks distribute and learning firsthand about the production of food that precedes its distribution and learning from and struggling side by side with the producers of that food.⁷ We call

6 Bloom and Martin, 349. To reiterate, Richard Nixon, who was an outright racist, was behind the first federal government affirmative action policy. Use that as ammunition for agitation when you get into arguments with people who believe reforms that benefit oppressed people principally happen by getting politicians with more progressive viewpoints elected to office.

7 When it comes to the question of organizing these producers into a union, my line is: do it Sendero-style or not at all.

that integrating with the masses, in this case the immigrant proletarians whose labor, combined with that of plantation workers in the oppressed nations, literally feeds the US population (grocery stores, charities, and mutual aid networks just distribute it). I can think of no better way for someone wanting to become a communist to spend the summer of 2021.

In his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx explained the fallacy of imagining that the masses' problems could be solved in the realm of distribution:

Any distribution whatever of the means of consumption is only a consequence of the distribution of the conditions of production themselves. The latter distribution, however, is a feature of the mode of production itself. The capitalist mode of production, for example, rests on the fact that the material conditions of production are in the hands of non-workers in the form of property in capital and land, while the masses are only owners of the personal condition of production, of labour power. If the elements of production are so distributed, then the present-day distribution of the means of consumption results automatically. If the material conditions of production are the co-operative property of the workers themselves, then there likewise results a distribution of the means of consumption different from the present one. Vulgar socialism (and from it in turn a section of the democracy) has taken over from the bourgeois economists the consideration and treatment of distribution as independent of the mode of production and hence the presentation of socialism as turning principally on distribution. After the real relation has long been made clear, why retrogress again?⁸

That was written in 1875, so I guess today's would-be revolutionaries have only taken the retrogression further. The reasons for today's retrogression include a low theoretical level and petty-bourgeois outlook when it comes to understanding the workings of capitalism-imperialism; a fear of waging class struggle (I know there are

⁸ Karl Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Program" [1875], in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition, edited by Robert Tucker (Norton, 1978), 531–32.

a few notable exceptions, but how many people today doing social work and calling it revolutionary have faced significant repression, or even been arrested?); and the ways that the ideology and politics of nonprofit activism have seeped into the thinking of most people in the US trying to figure out how to make radical change. On that last point, some (many?) of the would-be revolutionaries carrying out efforts to meet people's needs have jobs at nonprofit organizations and have failed to distinguish between what they feel compelled to do to make a living (that's putting it charitably—there's other jobs out there, including ones that will force you to integrate with the masses) and what they think is organizing for revolution. But even those that haven't worked at nonprofit activist organizations are still often beholden to their logic. As Dylan Rodriguez puts it, "More insidious than the raw structural constraints exerted by the foundation/state/non-profit nexus is the way in which this new [nonprofit] industry grounds an epistemology—literally, a *way of knowing* social change and resistance praxis—that is difficult to escape or rupture."⁹ This nonprofit-activist way of knowing social change always views the masses as people to be provided services rather than as the makers of history.

Perhaps the greatest flaw behind the logic of social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing is its failure to place class struggle at the core of organizing the masses. One of the reasons I opened this polemic with a rehash of Food Not Bombs is that at least Food Not Bombs sometimes unleashed struggle with the enemy and faced repression. In today's social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing model, the revolutionaries themselves try to meet the masses' needs, but

9 Dylan Rodriguez, "The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex," in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, edited by INCITE! (Duke University Press, 2017 [2007]), 31.

"THIS NONPROFIT-ACTIVIST WAY OF KNOWING
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THAN AS THE MAKERS OF HISTORY."

don't seek to organize the masses to wage class struggle to get their needs met, reinforcing passivity and avoiding confrontation with the bourgeois state. It is questionable how anyone can expect we get to the ultimate struggle—the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeoisie—if our activity today isn't focused on unleashing and increasing mass combativity, especially in a country like the US where social passivity reigns most of the time. It makes all the bravado on social media about this social work activity all the more pathetic (and notice how the level of bravado is usually directly proportional to the percentage of males in the organization?).

THE BLACK PANTHERS' SOCIAL PROGRAMS REVISITED

Nowadays, different people draw divergent lessons from the experience of the Black Panther Party (BPP). Some are inspired by it as a serious force for revolution to overthrow US imperialism that gained a rapid following in the tumultuous years of the late 1960s and seek to learn from its achievements and failures in order to figure out how a new revolutionary force can emerge, whether they view that in communist, revolutionary nationalist, or anarchist terms. The postmodernists alternate between praising it for “community-level change,” thereby fitting it into their narrow reformist Foucauldian vision of transforming the “power relations” under capitalism, and criticizing it for its “problematic masculinity” (note here how the postmodernists join run-of-the-mill racists in using the excuse of an aversion to “problematic Black masculinity” to condemn Black revolutionaries, and also how they use the word “problematic” to dodge dealing with things they find uncomfortable, especially when those things are said by oppressed people). A few Trotskyites try to fit the Panthers into their lame idea of socialism and pretend the irreconcilable antagonism between their opportunism and genuine revolutionary politics didn't exist in 1968.

Those carrying out the social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing model often cite the Black Panthers, and especially their Free Break-

fast for Children program, as a model for their own efforts. So it's worth digging into the strengths and weaknesses of the Black Panthers' social programs and situating them within a more historically accurate portrait of how and when they came into being and how they transformed over time. This will hopefully move the discussion beyond the oft-repeated refrain that "the Panthers did police patrols, social service programs, and electoral campaigns" that justifies an it's-all-good eclecticism rather than digs into the political lines in contention within the BPP and the different lines in command at different stages of its history. Sidenote: those with the it's-all-good eclecticism line never seem to mention that the BPP's principal activity was producing and selling a newspaper, nor do they ever include in their list of BPP tactics shaking down and strong-arming drug dealers, pimps, and prostitutes for money, which unfortunately became a part of Huey Newton's strategy in the mid-1970s. (Which is a more advanced line, that or running Bobby Seale for mayor of

For a few years, *The Black Panther* was the most widely read Black newspaper in the country, with a circulation peaking at 300,000 weekly and the total number of volumes produced surpassing 500. Pictured here selling the paper are Panthers Judi Douglas and Fred Bennett, the latter of whom was murdered in January 1971.



Oakland in 1972? Or is there a deeper unity underlying the two tactics which came into being around the same time?).

A starting point for this discussion needs to be: It was without a doubt the armed patrols of the police and the BPP's willingness to go up in the face of the pigs, sparking intense confrontations outside Merritt College, outside the *Ramparts* magazine office while Betty Shabazz was being interviewed, at the California State Capital, and in proletarian neighborhoods, that attracted Black proletarians and people from the student movements trying to figure out how to become revolutionaries to the BPP. Huey's hotheadedness in these confrontations was matched by his theoretical insight into the revolutionary potential of semi-lumpen youth and a popular program that resonated broadly with Black people at the time, with the BPP newspaper articulating and expanding on both in agitation that was the right combination of eminently reasonable and irreverently outrageous. When the police patrols and confrontational tactics were no longer possible to maintain due to the anti-Panther change to California gun laws and mounting legal cases, the BPP was forced to make strategic and tactical shifts to deal with these new realities.

Enter the Free Breakfast for Children program. The first began in Oakland in January 1969, and soon at least 36 were in operation across the country. Bloom and Martin explain the rationale behind the breakfast and other social programs in this way: "The Party sought meaningful activities for members that would serve the community, strengthen the Party, and improve its image in the public relations battle with the state. In this context, community programs quickly became a cornerstone of Party activity nationwide."¹⁰ They provide the following helpful summation of the accomplishments of the breakfast and other social programs:

"First, the services provided concrete aid to an impressive number and cross-section of folks—whites, blacks, and other people of color—materializing the notion of service to the community."

¹⁰ Bloom and Martin, 181.

“Second, these programs accomplished crucial educational and political work within communities, conveying the insufficiency of the capitalist welfare state to meet even the most basic needs of its citizens, especially its black citizens.”

“Third, the Panthers’ programs expanded communities’ understanding of the process of grassroots institutional development—how to create and sustain their own much-needed institutions from the ground up.” “Empowering black communities to take control of their own affairs and managing them in their best interests was central to the Party’s social service programs.”

“Fourth, these programs not only kept the Party alive in the face of awesome state repression, they also initially enabled it to grow during these trying times.”¹¹

Advocates of the social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing model tend to ignore or downplay the role of exposure that the BPP’s social programs played. In the midst of the federal government’s Great Society program intended to remedy poverty in the US, the BPP’s social programs revealed that large numbers of people, especially but not only Black people, did not have access to basic necessities such as a decent breakfast and healthcare. In this way, the social programs were part of all-around agitation exposing the bankruptcy of bourgeois rule and the need for revolution. And the Panthers used their social programs as opportunities to conduct further political education among the people eating breakfast, getting sickle cell tests, and attending after-school programs. If you ever talk to someone who attended a Panther after-school program, you will likely see the way the political education has stuck with them over decades. All this points to the difference in conception between using social programs as part of all-around exposure of the system,

¹¹ Ibid., 196–97. Fernández points out another reason for the breakfast programs’ popularity and an important ideological distinction between them and the Nation of Islam: “In New York, both the Young Lords and Black Panthers were known for serving bacon, which many poor children and their families considered a treat” (178).

agitation for revolution, and engaging with and organizing the masses in class struggle with revolutionary objectives guiding that struggle versus believing that if we just provide services and necessities to people, they will join the revolution.

The BPP's breakfast programs also included an element of asserting revolutionary authority, particularly in the way they commandeered food and space. As Bloom and Martin describe,

[b]usinesses donated food and supplies to the local breakfast programs for a mix of reasons, including altruism and the promotion of positive community relations. Businesses that chose not to help out faced the Party's wrath. At times the Panthers' cajoling blended into harassment and strong-arming. Far more common were boycotts and pickets of businesses that refused to assist the programs. Equally common was the tactic of calling out, or publicly shaming, those who refused to help. Churches and other community-based organizations that refused to help, notably those who refused to sponsor or allow breakfast programs on their premises, faced similar treatment. For starters, the Panther newspaper and Panther representatives railed against the non-supportive businessperson or community leader as a "capitalist pig." Other epithets included "religious hypocrites," "lying preachers and merchants," and "avaricious businessmen."¹²

A few important lessons can be gleaned here. First off, the BPP would not have secured donations from less-friendly businesses if they had never brandished guns or used violence (yes, for those of you who haven't talked to elders, some of the celebrities who gave money to the Panthers first received an ass whooping, as did some who publicly criticized the Panthers). But more than the threat of violence, we can see from the above description that the Panthers relied on the weapons of *exposure and agitation* and *mass mobilization* to force grocery stores and churches to donate food and space to their social service programs, hinging their ability to serve free food on political struggle. The Young Lords in NYC took a cue from the BPP and relied on the tactic of church and hospital takeovers

¹² Bloom and Martin, 185.

to force free breakfast and free healthcare programs into existence, even forcibly commandeering the New York Tuberculosis Association's mobile clinic and taking it to East Harlem to provide free tuberculosis testing.¹³

Much as there are positive lessons to learn from the BPP's social programs, we should also make a critical analysis of them, especially if we are going to develop social programs that do have the purpose of organizing people for revolution. Undoubtedly, many different people were attracted to and involved in the BPP's social programs for many different reasons, some viewing them as charity plain and simple (one of my high school teachers who took part in a Panther Free Breakfast program always insisted it was not about revolution, just about serving kids food). As an organization that grew rapidly and did not develop adequate mechanisms for ensuring the ideological quality of all of its recruits, there was considerable unevenness in how the BPP in different cities carried out its social programs. And within the leadership of the BPP and between its different branches, there were considerable line differences on the relative importance of the social programs and how they were part of a strategy for revolution. David Hilliard in particular came under sharp criticism from Eldridge Cleaver and from those who would go on to form the Black Liberation Army for his perceived conservatism and elevation of the social programs far above confrontations with the authorities and revolutionary agitation. Huey's "survival pending revolution" formulation came about in late 1970, well after these programs were in full swing. This change in conception increasingly divorced the thereafter named "survival programs" from the work of all-around exposure of the system, agitation for revolution, and mobilization of the masses in class struggle. The Panthers' newspaper increasingly backed off its biting revolutionary agitation and visual depictions of revolutionary violence, and the defection of many Panthers towards strategies of urban guerrilla warfare was in part a response to the felt betrayal of

¹³ All this is recounted in Fernández's *The Young Lords*; see p. 273 for an account of the tuberculosis mobile clinic hijack.

revolutionary purpose.¹⁴ The point of all this is that we need a critical analysis of the BPP's social programs and a recognition of the different conceptions and lines in command of them by different BPP leaders and in different periods of the BPP's history, or we are doomed to repeat mistakes and go down paths that have proven not to lead to revolution.

Johanna Fernández sums up the Young Lords' drug rehab program, which included a 24-hour isolation and detox, a six-month long buddy system, and an emphasis on political education, in this way: "On the ground...these efforts exhausted the group's limited organizational resources, confused social service with agitation and political strategy—the mainstay and primary function of a grassroots political organization—and, as experience has shown, weakened the group."¹⁵ She goes on to make the following critical analysis of the "serve the people" strategy of the BPP and Young Lords, highlighting the strengths of the social programs these organizations carried out while pointing out the ways in which they substituted the masses and class struggle with the dedication and voluntarism of revolutionary cadre:

¹⁴ Bloom and Martin, 352–58.

¹⁵ Fernández, 222.

Young Lords with a mobile X-ray unit that they seized several months before the Lincoln Hospital takeover in 1970.



U.S.-based Maoists embraced missionary-like political work among the people as a major catalyst of revolution, rather than mass popular insurrection. The slogan “serve the people,” popularized by the BPP, was an extension of this logic, whose premise decreed that through dedicated service, the cadre of a revolutionary group could deliver a better world to “the people” in the here and now as well as in the socialist future. In the United States, this kind of prefigurative action inspired, disciplined, and activated many, but in the absence of other parallel initiatives involving broader sectors of the population as actors themselves, the survival programs were limited. The Young Lords’ immense success during its early years was due to its combination of survival programs and militant campaigns that involved thousands of others and paralyzed sectors of the city. Unique for its time, the YLP’s management and artful use of media also amplified its influence beyond its numbers.

However, under the narrow “serve the people” framework, “the people” did not have to be the subject of history but could be liberated by a dedicated group of enlightened revolutionaries.¹⁶

A LOVE SUPREME

The slogan “serve the people” has become popular among today’s would-be Maoists in the US and has been taken even more literally than it was by the BPP or Young Lords, often reduced to literally serving people food. I’m not usually one for arguing about the “one and true meaning” of the words of Mao or other outstanding communist leaders—that way of thinking should belong to religious fanatics, not revolutionaries. But since the social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing model is so frequently justified with this slogan, it’s worth doing some battle over interpretation of Mao’s 1944 speech, *Serve the People* (which, unfortunately, most people doing “serve the people” practice today have probably never read, despite its brevity).

¹⁶ Ibid., 376.

Mao's essay emphasizes the following principles for communists:

- Not being afraid to take criticism from the masses and correct our mistakes.
- Being willing to die for the people (something Huey, Fred Hampton, and other Panther leaders also rightly emphasized).
- Being ready to struggle and sacrifice because we have the interests and suffering of the masses in our hearts, but avoiding unnecessary sacrifices.

Besides these principles, Mao advocated a concrete policy to deal with death, namely holding a funeral ceremony and a memorial meeting to honor fallen comrades, and when one of the masses in a village dies. Hopefully our struggle today in the US will reach the point where us atheist communists have to figure out policies for dealing with the deaths of comrades in the course of the struggle.

Mao's 1939 essay, *In Memory of Norman Bethune*, which, in ideological training, has often been used as a companion to *Serve the People*, joins the principle of sacrifice for the revolution with that of internationalism. Mao praised Canadian doctor Norman Bethune, who was sent by the Canadian CP to China to be a doctor for the Chinese Red Army during the war of resistance against Japanese imperialism, for his inspiring example of concretely living internationalism by giving practical assistance to revolutionary struggles in other parts of the world and paying for it with his life.

What emerges from these two pieces is a lofty sense of purpose and a deep love for the masses in stark contrast to the narrow horizons within which "serve the people" is being used by today's would-be Maoists in the US. Mao's practical examples of serving the people have nothing to do with charity or social work. He emphasized being willing to lay down your life in the course of the revolutionary struggle and subjecting our efforts to criticism so we can ensure our practice is serving the highest purpose of making revolution. It is this spirit that is sorely lacking today among

most of those who talk about “serve the people.” On the principle of subjecting our efforts to criticism, it is disturbing to see some new “serve the people” effort pop up every six months with lots of boasting on social media (again, the level of boasting usually being proportional to the percentage of male membership in the organization), have its moment in the sun among dumb Leftists as though it was the latest fashion at a suburban middle school, and then the organization behind it breaks up with no self-criticism or analysis of the line behind its efforts. As long as this cycle of stupidity continues among today’s would-be revolutionaries, nothing even close to the revolutionary legacy of the Black Panthers and Young Lords, let alone the Communist Party of China under Mao’s leadership, will ever emerge.

MALCOLM X DIDN’T DISH OUT FREE BEAN PIES

Besides lacking loftiness and revolutionary purpose, the social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing model also lacks the weapons of agitation, exposure, and ideological struggle. As a starting point for this discussion, it’s worth asking: Why was Malcolm X the most respected person in Harlem in the early 1960s, with a growing following among and deep love from Black proletarians and revolutionary-minded people nationwide? It wasn’t because Mosque No. 7 ran a successful free bean pie distribution program.¹⁷ Malcolm X was revered for his biting exposure of the system and his relentless ideological struggle against all ways of thinking that were holding Black people back in their struggle for liberation. People came to hear Malcolm X *speak*, and I don’t ever recall seeing the words “free food” on a poster advertising a Malcolm X speech. Listening to his

17 It’s worth acknowledging here that the Nation of Islam has run many successful social programs, always with a heavy dose of ideological education. Its drug addiction treatment programs in the 1980s, in the midst of the crack epidemic and the Reagan administration’s defunding of government drug addiction treatment programs, are particularly worth studying.



Malcolm X using the weapon of agitation to expose the crimes of white supremacy.

speeches today is an excellent way to train yourself in methods of exposure of the system and ideological struggle with the people, both of which are crucial tools for bringing forward a *revolutionary* people.¹⁸

Here it's worth revisiting principles put forward by Lenin in his 1902 *What Is To Be Done?* and contrasting those principles with the rationale behind and practice of the social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing model. Lenin argued that the spontaneous consciousness generated through the spontaneous struggles of the proletariat over economic conditions will not rise to an understanding of the workings of capitalism-imperialism that are behind these conditions, the need for revolution, and the proletariat's role in that revolution—that is, proletarian class-consciousness—without the intervention of conscious communists. As we see long lines of

¹⁸ For real...for a period of time, a comrade and I would wake up most mornings and put a Malcolm X speech on blast while we ate our Raisin Bran.

masses waiting for free food bags (to be clear, mostly from government and bourgeois charities, not from would-be revolutionaries) amidst the 'rona pandemic that has left so many jobless, we should ask ourselves: in addition to food, do they not also need political exposure of the system that has left them jobless? And shouldn't that exposure focus not just on how the system has left them jobless, but also on how it affects all other sections of people, here and around the world?

Lenin's conception of political exposure insisted on a breadth of understanding of the entire system and its effects on all sections of the people rather than only focusing the masses' attention on their own and most immediate concerns:

The rural superintendents and the flogging of peasants, the corruption of the officials and the police treatment of the "common people" in the cities, the fight against the famine-stricken and the suppression of the popular striving towards enlightenment and knowledge, the extortion of taxes and the persecution of the religious sects, the humiliating treatment of soldiers and the barrack methods in the treatment of students and liberal intellectuals—do all these and a thousand other similar manifestations of tyranny, though not directly connected with the "economic" struggle, represent, in general, less "widely applicable" means and occasions for political agitation and for drawing the masses into the political struggle?¹⁹

Though of course the particulars need to be updated for time and place, the principle here of turning the masses' attention to all injustices in society and exposing the machinations of capitalism-imperialism behind them is entirely correct and in stark contrast to attempting to organize people and raise their consciousness solely or principally through the prism of their own survival needs. If anything, Lenin's insistence on broad exposure beyond just the oppression and exploitation facing a section of people needs to be broadened further to include bringing the masses' attention to

¹⁹ Lenin, *What Is To Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* [1902], in *Selected Works*, vol 1 (Progress Publishers, 1977), 136.

scientific debates, questions of spirituality, artistic expression, and culture in contemporary society, and the challenges of the socialist transition to communism, among other things.

Lenin linked the work of all-around political exposure to the development of proletarian class-consciousness and revolutionary activity (I have replaced “social-democrat” with “communist” in the below quotation since the former means something quite different today than it did when Lenin wrote it):

Working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to *all* cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter *what class* is affected—unless they are trained, moreover, to respond from a [communist] point of view and no other. The consciousness of the working masses cannot be genuine class-consciousness, unless the workers learn, from concrete, and above all topical, political facts and events to observe *every* other social class in *all* the manifestations of its intellectual,

Taken under Bolshevik control in 1912, under Lenin’s leadership, *Pravda* (Truth) would establish an average circulation of 40,000 in the lead up to World War I, with over half of its distribution within the city that would become the epicenter of the Russian Revolution, St. Petersburg.



ethical, and political life; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist analysis and the materialist estimate of *all* aspects of the life and activity of *all* classes, strata, and groups of population. Those who concentrate the attention, observation, and consciousness of the working class exclusively, or even mainly, upon itself alone are not [communists]; for the self-knowledge of the working class is indissolubly bound up not solely with a fully clear theoretical understanding—or rather, not so much with the theoretical, as with the practical, understanding—of the relationships between *all* the various classes of modern society, acquired through the experience of political life.²⁰

Far from the elitism Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* is often accused of, Lenin's view of the masses here is not to treat them paternalistically and presume that they are only capable of understanding and responding to their immediate needs and oppression. Instead, Lenin insisted that they are perfectly capable of mastering all political questions and providing leadership to the struggles of all sections of the people, if and when they are trained to do so through communist methods. As he pointed out with his characteristic sarcasm in *What Is To Be Done?*, the economists of his time in fact trailed far behind where the masses were at politically and ideologically in insisting that those masses could only be won to focus on struggles pertaining to their immediate economic needs.

Unfortunately, the social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing model picks up where the economists of a century ago left off, except instead of seeking to organize the masses in struggle around their economic needs, it attempts to provide the masses with those needs through charity. To paraphrase Lenin, the communist's ideal should not be the charitable social worker, but the tribune of the people, who is able to provide compelling agitation that exposes all instances of oppression and injustice, everywhere in society among all sections of the people, and from this agitation reveals the system of capitalism-imperialism behind the curtain; who is capable of taking every opportunity to put before all their communist con-

²⁰ Ibid., 145.

victions and to divert all the spontaneous struggles that emerge in society towards revolutionary objectives.²¹

MOBILIZING THE MASSES IN CLASS STRUGGLE FOR THEIR SURVIVAL NEEDS

While the kind of ideological and political work aimed at moving masses to proletarian class-consciousness described above is sorely neglected by today's would-be revolutionaries in the US, it is by no means the only practice needed to bring forward a revolutionary people. Indeed, we should take every opportunity to reveal the bankruptcy of capitalism-imperialism and bring forward the system's gravediggers as a revolutionary people, and the system's failures to meet people's needs for food, healthcare, clothing, etc., are such opportunities. The question is how to seize on them in a way that moves us towards revolution. Where the social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing model fails in this regard is in doing charity for people to meet their needs rather than mobilizing masses in class struggle to get their needs met.

Here the example of the Black Panthers and the Young Lords provides some instruction and inspiration. Before and after the implementation of the BPP's social programs, the BPP distinguished itself in part because when the masses brought their problems to the BPP's attention, it led them to go into political battle with their oppressors. The result was numerous confrontations—at police stations after the police murdered or brutalized someone, at schools when administrators and teachers brutalized students, at welfare

²¹ Lenin's words were: "the Social-Democrat's ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but the tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth before all his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for all and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat" (153–54).

offices, at businesses who mistreated or refused to hire Black people—that emboldened the masses and established the revolutionary authority of the BPP. As Bloom and Martin summarize:

Reenacted countless times in black communities across the country, ...confrontations between the Panthers and authorities helped build strong local Party chapters. Local Party chapters frequently served as community sounding boards and social service agencies—as black people’s stewards—deeply committed to social justice and community betterment. The Party essentially said to the community, Bring your concerns to us. And they did.²²

The New York Young Lords were particularly impressive when it came to bold tactics that exposed the system’s failures to meet people’s needs, mobilized masses in militant tactics to force a reaction from the system, and garnered media coverage and growing support from sections of the people beyond the proletariat. In doing so, they found ways to apply the general principles of guerrilla warfare to political struggle: concentrating forces, conducting “lightning raids,” escaping when the enemy concentrated its forces, and acting as fish in a sea of mass support.

In the summer of 1969, East Harlem residents’ noses were assaulted daily with the putrid smells of piles of trash, which the sanitation department failed to pick up. Recognizing this as a pressing problem before the proletarian neighborhood in which their political work was based, the Young Lords started sweeping sidewalks and hauling garbage, but what really lit up the sky was when they threw garbage in the middle of 3rd Ave. at 110th St., stopping traffic. And it wasn’t just bags of trash in this busy intersection, but also furniture that had been left on the sidewalk and never disposed of. Inspired by this act of defiance, the masses joined in, not only throwing festering trash in the streets, but sometimes lighting it on fire and overturning abandoned cars. This forced the city government to start picking up trash in East Harlem. Had the Young Lords stuck to just sweeping the trash themselves (notably, that’s exactly

²² Bloom and Martin, 180.

what a recent short-lived group of would-be revolutionaries in NYC did), rather than advancing to unleash mass combativity through the defiant act of clogging streets with garbage, nothing would have changed in the lives of the masses, the masses would never have been involved in the effort, and the Young Lords would not have won the respect of the people in the neighborhood nor garnered many new recruits.²³

When the Young Lords wanted to start a free breakfast for children and other community programs and the local church in East Harlem, headed by a reactionary anti-communist priest, refused the use of its space, the Young Lords, after spending time attending church services and talking to parishioners, forcibly took over the church on 28 December 1969. They ran their desired community programs inside the church under this act of establishing revolutionary authority, as well as hosting political education sessions and lively evening performances of revolutionary culture. While the church occupation could not last indefinitely and the Young Lords had the tactical sense to decide when it was time to exit, with lots of news cameras in attendance, their actions generated considerable support in the neighborhood and beyond, and forced the church into negotiations to use its space.²⁴

Probably most well-known is the Young Lords' brief takeover of Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx. This bold action involving 150 members of the Young Lords was preceded by ongoing organized

23 Fernández, chapter 3. This example also highlights the flaws of stale class analysis and outdated concepts of the working-class. Department of Sanitation workers, overwhelmingly white at the time (not sure if that's really changed all that much), were paid quite well and received the benefits of a city government job. As bourgeoisified workers, their class outlook was generally hostile to the lower and deeper sections of the proletariat whom Lenin referred to as the "real masses." Put simply, they didn't give a fuck if Puerto Ricans in East Harlem had to deal with mounting, smelly piles of trash on their sidewalks. The class struggle the Young Lords led over garbage pickup was not just against the local bourgeoisie and city government, but also against a section of bourgeoisified white workers.

24 Ibid., chapter 6.

struggles by hospital workers, growing outrage at poor medical treatment and even unnecessary death at the hospital, and the Young Lords setting up and staffing a complaint table in the emergency room and going with patients to confront hospital officials about poor treatment and remedy their problems. In other words, the Young Lords had done the hard and patient work of social investigation, building ties among patients and hospital workers, and gaining a comprehensive understanding of the problems of the masses. The hospital takeover itself was well disciplined, with the Young Lords coordinating with hospital staff to keep the hospital running smoothly while they opened a free health clinic inside.²⁵

These and other examples can be found in Johanna Fernández's compelling, thorough, and detailed *The Young Lords: A Radical History*, a book that is only weakened by its occasional use of postmodernist jargon and formulations,²⁶ which at times makes

²⁵ Ibid., chapter 9.

²⁶ For example, Fernández frequently uses the postmodernist term “racialized” to refer to Puerto Ricans in the US, which makes the oppression of nations and nationalities under capitalism-imperialism seem to be principally generated by “discourses” rather than material conditions of oppression, and also begs the question: aren’t white people also “racialized,” but as an oppressor nation? Probably the worst postmodernist formulation in the book is the following from p. 70: “The widespread use of force by police against members of a given group combined with state-sanctioned protection of police, in spite of their abuse of authority, have been defining cornerstones of racial subjugation in the United States.” In this application of Foucault’s concept of power relations (rather than his concept of states of domination, which would be far more appropriate here), the police are abusing their authority when they brutalize oppressed people rather than doing their jobs as defenders of a system that must keep oppressed people brutalized. Moreover, the police in this formulation are not a part of the repressive state apparatus, but some separate entity, and the state has decided to “sanction” the police when the police decide (on their own?) to brutalize oppressed people. When a radical, intelligent, and thorough historian like Fernández can come up with such an absurd theoretical conception of the police and their brutality, it’s no wonder the activist crowd is so easily taken in by nonprofit organization careerist activists and appoints them the leaders of the struggle against the police murder of Black people despite the paltry reformism, thinly veiled by the radical-sounding rhetoric of “defund” and “abolish” the police, of their proposed solutions.

the writing a bit airy and fails to fully appreciate the Young Lords' sense of humor, as well as a lack of clarity on the difference between radical movements for community change and revolutionary movements to overthrow the existing order.²⁷ The practice of the Young Lords, whatever its strengths and weaknesses, is well worth studying for how it successfully mobilized its ranks and the masses in class struggle that confronted class enemies, exerted revolutionary authority, and expanded its membership, mass base, and broader support through inspiring actions, all with demands and tactics arrived at based on social investigation into the problems facing the masses. This practice is in stark contrast to today's social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing model, which starts with little or no social investigation and never seems to remedy this shortcoming, fails to mobilize the masses, and so far has not led to any substantial struggle with the enemy.

It's worth noting too that while the Young Lords did work to develop their own social programs under their own revolutionary authority, they were also not afraid to make demands on the bourgeois state while correctly refusing to get wrapped up in the workings of bourgeois-democracy. This willingness and even flair for exerting demands on the bourgeois state is something that today's would-be revolutionaries seem to have rejected in favor of the petty-bourgeois fantasy of bottom-up counter-institutions maintaining a safe distance from the bourgeois state and eventually replacing it, without any conception of the need for a revolutionary civil war that *destroys* the bourgeois state. There is a deep link here between this "bottom-up" fantasy and the lack (and let's be honest:

²⁷ The Young Lords were certainly on the latter tip in spirit, though, in fairness to Fernández, in theory and practice had a lack of clarity themselves on the difference between the latter and the former. This lack of clarity is no surprise considering the Young Lords were a young, inexperienced organization that grew rapidly in a short time period and was severed from much contact with revolutionary elders. Fernández, refreshingly in today's political climate, helpfully and consistently points out that the lack of connection to an older generation of revolutionaries was in large part due to the Red Scare and demise of the Communist Party.

fear) of mobilizing the masses *in class struggle with the enemy*, and such struggle now is a crucial part of preparing the masses for the all-out struggle for power in the future.

BRINGING FORWARD A REVOLUTIONARY PEOPLE...AND PAYING ATTENTION TO THEIR NEEDS FROM THAT PERSPECTIVE

Some might read this and say “okay, yes, we need to mobilize the masses in class struggle, we need to wage ideological struggle and develop class-consciousness among them, but we can’t do that if we don’t meet the needs of the masses.” For the most part, this is just tailing the intermediate and backwards among the masses and justifying your own petty-bourgeois fears with their sentiments. At best, it is putting a very secondary aspect of revolutionary strategy above aspects (waging class struggle, developing proletarian class-consciousness) that are principal by a long shot—*wrong lines are almost always asserted through eclecticism*. But it does have a point. Since Mao is often used to justify the social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing model, it’s worth digging into what he actually put forward on this question.

In *Be Concerned with the Well-Being of the Masses, Pay Attention to Methods of Work* (1934), Mao stated:

Our central task at present is to mobilize the broad masses to take part in the revolutionary war, overthrow imperialism and the Kuomintang by means of such war, spread the revolution throughout the country, and drive imperialism out of China. Anyone who does not attach enough importance to this central task is not a good revolutionary cadre. If our comrades really comprehend this task and understand that the revolution must at all costs be spread throughout the country, then they should in no way neglect or underestimate the question of the immediate interests, the well-being, of the broad masses. For the revolutionary war is a

war of the masses; it can be waged only by mobilizing the masses and relying on them.²⁸

Unfortunately, our central task does not yet involve waging revolutionary warfare. Instead, it is developing *the subjective forces for revolution*—namely, organizations of communist cadre and eventually a vanguard party, communist-led mass organizations especially among the proletariat, and a growing united front of class forces under the leadership of the revolutionary proletariat—and putting these forces on an increasingly intense collision course with the bourgeoisie and its organs of state power so that our central task becomes waging revolutionary warfare. If we put secondary tasks, such as meeting the needs of the masses, above our central task, then we are doomed to fail.

Mao recognized that in order to succeed at our central task, we do have to carry out secondary tasks; his 1956 *On the Ten Major Relationships* is an especially insightful example of this method in relation to socialist construction. In *Be Concerned with the Well-Being of the Masses, Pay Attention to Methods of Work*, Mao argued that in order to defeat the enemy, “all the practical problems in the masses’ everyday life should claim our attention. If we attend to these problems, solve them and satisfy the needs of the masses, we shall really become organizers of the well-being of the masses, and they will truly rally round us and give us their warm support. Comrades, will we then be able to arouse them to take part in the revolutionary war? Yes, indeed we will.”

Mao contrasted areas where Communist Party local leadership was successful in recruiting masses into the Red Army with areas that were not. In the latter, Mao described how some comrades “talk only about expanding the Red Army, enlarging the transport corps, collecting the land tax and selling bonds; as for other matters, they neither discuss nor attend to them, and even ignore them altogether.” For example, the “Tingchow Municipal government concerned itself only with the expansion of the Red Army...and paid not the slightest attention to the well-being of the masses.” The result was that when the masses were looking to the revolutionary government to solve their

28 As published in Mao's *Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Foreign Languages Press, 1975), 147.

problems, it didn't, and therefore few people were recruited into the Red Army. In contrast, Changkang Township in Kiangsi and Tsaihsi Township in Fukien did well at recruiting people into the Red Army (80% and 88% of young men and women in each township, respectively), in part because they paid attention to solving the masses' problems by mobilizing mutual aid when, for example, fire destroyed a peasant's house or there was a rice shortage.²⁹

Mao's advice to his comrades was to

...pay close attention to the well-being of the masses, from the problems of land and labour to those of fuel, rice, cooking oil and salt... We should convince the masses that we represent their interests, that our lives are intimately bound up with theirs. We should help them to proceed from these things to an understanding of the higher tasks which we have put forward, the tasks of revolutionary war, so that they will support the revolution and spread it throughout the country, respond to our political appeals and fight to the end for victory in the revolution.³⁰

If we are to properly heed this advice today, we should keep in mind three things: (1) This advice was given in the context of the Communist Party of China beginning to govern areas which it had seized in the course of *revolutionary warfare*, and when you are *in the position of governing*, land, labor, food, etc. are your responsibilities. (2) The purpose of paying attention to the needs of the masses was, for Mao, to mobilize them in revolutionary warfare to seize power so that a socialist society could begin not only meeting their survival needs, but making them the masters of society on the road to communism. (3) Mao issued this advice in struggle with comrades who were dogmatically and mechanically narrowly focusing on recruiting masses into the Red Army through sloganeering rather than developing correct and comprehensive methods for bringing forward the masses as a revolutionary people. If we don't keep these three things in mind, it's easy to misinterpret

29 Ibid., 148–49. I kept the Wade-Giles transliteration only because that's what was used in the published version of Mao's speech, not out of any endorsement for a British colonial transliteration system over pinyin.

30 Ibid., 149.

Mao's words as a stage-ist recipe, wherein in order to involve the masses in class struggle or develop their proletarian class-consciousness, we must first prove that we can meet their needs. Since we don't have state power and are not by any stretch of the imagination in a similar position to the Communist Party of China in 1934, such stage-ism is doomed to keep us stuck in the stage of trying to prove to the masses that we can meet their needs better than the bourgeoisie can.

To me, the fundamental question here is how to bring forward the masses as a revolutionary people. Charity has never and will never accomplish this. But we will have to find ways to collectively deal with some of the practical burdens that hold the masses back from stepping forward as a revolutionary people. I'm reminded of a group of comrades I used to know who moved into a housing project while leading the struggle against its demolition. Not surprisingly, they found that the most advanced among the masses in the projects tended to be women in their twenties with young children. Unlike the men their age, most of whom were involved in the underground economy, these women had the responsibility of children to raise, which made them more likely to think collectively and think about the future (whereas the young men often took the "I could live or die" attitude, not without reason). Since they were still young, these mothers were not yet conservative in their thinking or so ground down by the system to lack hope for a better future. Giving these women, busy as they were with childcare responsibilities, some free time was an important contribution the comrades who moved into the housing project could make to enabling them to take part in the practical struggle against the demolition of the projects and in taking up bigger questions of revolutionary strategy. So these comrades started holding parties for children, providing free time for the young mothers to take care of themselves, rest, read, or do whatever they needed to do with that time. At the parties, the comrades could set standards for revolutionary culture and social relations among the kids. One of them once recounted to me confiscating a screwdriver from a boy attending the party, which presented an opportunity to discuss how to resolve contradictions among the people with a ten-year-old.

The point of this small story is that in taking up the *secondary* tasks of meeting the needs of the masses, we must be strategic in choosing to meet those needs that best enable the masses we are seeking to organize to come forward as a revolutionary people. Otherwise, our efforts may alleviate some suffering and make us feel good about ourselves, but they will contribute nothing to building the subjective forces for revolution, and if anything, help the system stay intact by acting as a pressure valve, just like the nonprofit organizations. With precious few real communists today, why would we want to waste any of our time on charity and social work?

CONCLUSION

This essay is in part a companion to my article in *kites* #1, *On Infantile Internet Disorders and Real Questions of Revolutionary Strategy: A Response to the "Debate" over the Universality of Protracted People's War*, which aimed its polemical fire at the church of PPW universalism while (more importantly) digging into questions of revolutionary strategy and problems in Maoist philosophy and history. The reason these two polemics form a pair is that the social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing model and the pretend ultra-leftists³¹ who talk about (but never act on) the idea of protracted people's war in imperialist countries in some ways constitute opposite ends of the same stupidity, to borrow a formulation from someone who was even (or hopefully much) more of a sarcastic asshole than I am, namely Lenin. For what these two trends share in common is a petty-bourgeois view of proletarian masses as people who have to be manipulated—through charity or pretend ultra-left posturing—into the revolution.³² They

31 As distinguished from real ultra-leftists, like the Red Army Faction, who could at least succeed in getting what Mao called "some satisfaction" (for example: the Red Army Faction assassinated the attorney general of West Germany when their comrades were being held in prison) even if their strategy could never achieve "total satisfaction." Ugh...I never thought I'd feel compelled to draw a firm distinction between real ultra-leftists and pretend ultra-leftists, but I guess that's where things are at these days...fuck!

32 In *What Is To Be Done?*, Lenin made a similar point in relation to the worship of spontaneity by the economists and ultra-leftists of his day: "The economists

both idealize the revolutionary potential of the masses while avoiding dealing with the contradictions of bringing the masses forward as a revolutionary people, imagining there is some magic bullet or get-rich-quick scheme that can do the trick.

Carrying out erroneous strategies such as the social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing model can be a productive part of the development of new communists who learn from their mistakes and are strengthened by their persistence in the face of failures. Mao described this as the logic of the people: “fight, fail, fight again, fail again, fight again...until their victory.” But there are a few problems that have held back this positive side of pursuing false paths.

One, the erroneous strategy of social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing is nothing new. It has been carried out countless times by multiple organizations, both in the past and exponentially in the last several years. The failure of today’s would-be revolutionaries to study history and to talk to revolutionaries from previous generations leads to lots of time wasted on practices that have been previously proven unable to make advances towards revolution and to many demoralized people giving up. (Heartfelt gratitude here to all the elders whose wisdom and guidance steered me away from making many foolish mistakes.)

Two, the lack of critical summation of the efforts carried out in the social-work-as-revolutionary-organizing model in the last several years. Instead of critical summation, we get bombastic statements on the internet boasting of great success in “serving the people,” as though it’s some great surprise that impoverished people want free food. A deep historical problem in the international communist movement has been mistaking popular support for specific political programs or tactics (the big example being the united front against

and the present-day terrorists have one common root, namely, *subservience to spontaneity*...the Economists bow to the spontaneity of ‘the labour movement pure and simple,’ while the terrorists bow to the spontaneity of the passionate indignation of intellectuals, who lack the ability or opportunity to connect the revolutionary struggle and the working-class movement into an integral whole” (149).

fascism in the 1930s and '40s) with popular support for the aims and objectives of communist revolution. Here, this problem is being pathetically repeated in summations that presume appreciation for charity is agreement with and enthusiasm for the radical-sounding rhetoric that accompanies free food. Furthermore, how many “serve the people” efforts have cropped up over the last five years, achieved their moment in the sun among dumb internet Leftists, and then folded shortly thereafter with no summation of their successes and failures, let alone the questions of political line posed by their efforts?

Three, arrogance amplified by the internet, plain and simple. To be “ageist” for a second, this kind of arrogance runs especially high among Gen Z would-be revolutionaries, who are often quick to claim confidence in the correctness of the clique they claim’s³³ strategy and justify it with a rather shallow understanding of revolutionary theory garnered from Google searches and social media posts (how much more advanced would such people be if they got a *physical copy* of Mao’s Red Book and tried to live up to its content?). The problem with this arrogance is that it prevents people from admitting to the contradictions and challenges involved in figuring out how to make revolution, from engaging in the healthy practice of criticism and self-criticism that is at the heart of communist organization, and from transformation.

The good news here is that it’s always possible to rectify our errors and transform ourselves, our practice, and our world. That takes relentless line struggle with all strategies and conceptions that will not lead to revolution, unsparing criticism and self-criticism of all our efforts, study of past revolutionary experiences to meet the challenges of the present and forge a different future, and, perhaps most importantly, getting over your petty-bourgeois fears and talking to and integrating with the masses. Serve the people...for real, not merely with free food, but with real revolutionary politics and struggle.

³³ Thanks, Tupac, for your brilliant alliterations.