Resisting racial militarism: War, policing and the Black Panther Party

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Abstract
The past ten years have witnessed a revival in scholarship on militarism, through which scholars have used the concept to make sense of the embeddedness of warlike relations in contemporary liberal societies and to account for how the social, political and economic contours of those same societies are implicated in the legitimation and organization of political violence. However, a persistent shortcoming has been the secondary role of race and coloniality in these accounts. This article demonstrates how we might position racism and colonialism as integral to the functioning of contemporary militarism. Centring the thought and praxis of the US Black Panther Party, we argue that the particular analysis developed by Black Panther Party members, alongside their often-tense participation in the anti–Vietnam War movement, offers a strong reading of the racialized and colonial politics of militarism. In particular, we show how their analysis of the ghetto as a colonial space, their understanding of the police as an illegitimate army of occupation and, most importantly, Huey Newton’s concept of intercommunalism prefigure an understanding of militarism premised on the interconnections between racial capitalism, violent practices of un/bordering and the dissolving boundaries between war and police action.

Keywords
Black Panther Party, empire, intercommunalism, militarism, racial capitalism, racism

Introduction
The US Black Panther Party (BPP) has long been an inspiration and intellectual touchstone for anti-racist and anti-fascist movements around the globe. Thanks to its promotion of community self-defence and survival programmes, its role in developing an aesthetics of Black pride and
rebellion, and its accompanying critiques of police, state and carceral violence, racial and capitalist exploitation, and global imperialism, the party’s place as one of the most significant revolutionary movements of the 20th century is assured. In the 21st century, against a backdrop of mounting racial oppression and economic stratification, and specifically in the aftermath of the brutal police murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the worldwide protests that erupted in response, the party is perhaps more relevant than ever, with its tactics and analyses forming an integral component of the genealogy of contemporary Black radicalism. In this article, we show how the BPP developed a radical and valuable account of the politics of militarism. By reflecting on its members’ participation in the anti–Vietnam War movement, as well as their analysis of the ghetto as a colonized and occupied space, and through an excavation of Panther leader Huey P. Newton’s theory of ‘intercommunalism’, we outline an account of militarism that foregrounds the politics of race and coloniality. This account emphasizes the interactions of racial capitalism, the privatization of warfare, violent practices of un/bordering, and police power, allowing both for a substantive account of present-day militarism as well as radical inhabitations of anti-militarism.

Within international relations, scholarship on militarism has seen a considerable resurgence in recent years. A key concept during the Cold War, militarism was pushed to the margins of academic inquiry by a combination of liberal triumphalism and security hegemony (Stavrianakis and Selby, 2012a; Stavrianakis and Stern, 2018). Few beyond feminist scholars paid serious attention to developing and using the concept (Cockburn, 2012; Enloe, 2000). More recently, there has been a renewed interest in the concept of militarism as a way of making sense of the embeddedness of warlike relations in contemporary ‘liberal’ societies, and of accounting for how the social, political and economic contours of those same societies are implicated in the legitimation and organization of political violence (Basham, 2013; Rossdale, 2019; Stavrianakis and Selby, 2012b). Building on the insights generated by this important body of work, this article seeks to spotlight race and racism in contemporary militarism. It departs from much of the literature, however, by arguing that racism and coloniality are not epiphenomenal to or merely ‘facets’ of militarism, but are in fact integral to its functioning.

By highlighting a persistent shortcoming in international relations scholarship on militarism – that is, the limited account of race and coloniality – we do not mean to imply that these categories are completely absent. Rather, our claim is that race, racism and empire are frequently positioned as secondary to what are considered more fundamental features through which political violence is entrenched and made possible. This absence – or, more accurately, subsumption – of race and coloniality severely limits the concept of militarism. More problematically, it produces analyses that normalize or overlook the violence to and through which racialized subjects are targeted, subjugated and enlisted. It produces accounts of militarism and its associated hierarchies (war/peace, normal/exception, violence/nonviolence) that reproduce the very foundations through which racialized violence is made possible. In contrast, and writing alongside others who view racism as foundational to militarism (Howell, 2018; Khalid, 2015; Parashar, 2018; Stuurman, 2020), in this article we put forward an account of contemporary militarism that is intrinsically concerned with the politics of both race and colonialism.

We develop our argument through a sustained encounter with the Black Panther Party, a Black radical organization active across the USA and internationally between 1966 and 1974. From its origins in Oakland, California, the BPP grew quickly, electrifying Black radical politics by combining a potent analysis of racial and capitalist exploitation with practical organizing and a new aesthetics of pride and rebellion (Heath, 1973). At its peak, the BPP was one of the dominant revolutionary forces within the USA, with 68 chapters in cities across the country alongside an international section headquartered in Algeria and close relationships with political organizations throughout Asia, Africa and Europe (Bloom and Martin, 2016: 2–3). The Panthers were taken
seriously enough that the US state directed a massive programme of violent repression against them. They were notable for their use of armed self-defence against agents of the state, for their extensive community survival projects that included the provision of free medical care, legal support and a massive breakfasts-for-children programme, and for an internationalism that drew intimate connections between the experience of the ghetto and global anti-colonial struggle.

In the article, we show how the particular analysis developed by BPP members, manifested both in the accounts of key figures – especially Newton – and the embodied politics of the movement, offer an important reading of the politics of contemporary militarism. In the initial section of the article, we show how the Panthers’ often-uneasy participation in the anti–Vietnam War peace movement demonstrated the limitations of conceptualizations of militarism that overlook or subordinate policing and racialized state violence. We then examine how the BPP challenged the spatial and statist contours through which militarism is often understood by offering a sustained critique grounded in its members’ analysis of the ghetto as a colonized space and their understanding of the police as an army of occupation. This account urges a rethinking of conventional distinctions between war and peace, international and domestic, and sets up an understanding of militarism that begins with racist exploitation and policing. The second half of the article develops this account further by engaging the concept of intercommunalism, introduced by Newton in 1970 to theorize the declining importance of nation-states and the corresponding emergence of neoliberal racial capitalism. We submit that intercommunalism, as a reorientation of prominent understandings of imperialism away from the state and towards a political economy of imperial extraction and power projection, grounds a formidable account of militarism. This intercommunal theory of militarism is constitutively attentive to the interactions of racial capitalism, police power, and the uneven, albeit simultaneous, withering away and intensification of state practices. We expound on this first through Newton’s speeches and writing on the subject, and subsequently through a case study of martial relations between the USA and Israel. This was a relationship that was of some interest to the Panthers, because it represented both particularly violent practices of empire and important possibilities for resistance and solidarity. We show how an intercommunal account of militarism calls attention to the operations of racial capitalism, violent practices of un/bordering, and police power in this relationship, as well as some potential routes for international solidarity and a radical anti-militarist politics.

Vietnam

The Panthers’ rapid growth between 1966 and 1970 coincided with both the escalation of the war in Vietnam and the development of an anti-war movement that, in 1969, would involve the largest public protests to date in US history. Newton, Eldridge Cleaver and other Panther leaders paid careful attention to this emerging crisis in US military power, not least because it provided opportunities to weave together apparently disparate struggles and build new coalitions in opposition to empire. It was on the basis of a shared opposition to imperial intervention that the Panthers cautiously supported the anti-war movement. However, the Panthers also criticized the peace movement for its failures to fully contend with the continuities between the war in Vietnam and the treatment of Black people within the USA. Their ambiguous relationship with this movement highlights both the critical potential of a BPP account of militarism and the limitations of approaches to militarism that fail to attend to the intimacies of racism and militarism.

The war in Vietnam emerged as an important reference point for the Panthers. They insisted on a fundamental equivalence between the experience of peasants in Vietnam and that of Black people in the USA, both subjected to a violent American state. They also refused to differentiate between the agents of this state, Newton (2009: 118) recalling that ‘we . . . viewed the local police, the
National Guard, and the regular military as one huge armed group that opposed the will of the people’. Elsewhere, he expanded:

Black people desire to determine their own destiny. As a result, they are constantly inflicted with brutality from the occupying army, embodied in the police department. There is a great similarity between the occupying army in Southeast Asia and the occupation of our communities by the racist police. The armies are there not to protect the people of South Vietnam, but to brutalize and oppress them in the interests of imperial powers. (Newton, 2019: 161)

These equivalences grounded an analysis that situated the relationship between the US state and Black people as both warlike and colonial, with the ghetto subjected to military occupation by the police. This analysis also set the terms for international solidarities through which US imperialism might be overthrown. Reflecting on the violent suppression of the Watts uprising in 1965, Cleaver (1968: 159) wrote that the ‘blacks in Watts and all over America could now see the Viet Cong’s point: both were on the receiving end of what the armed forces were dishing out’. He further reflected on ‘what all those dead bodies, on two fronts, implied. Those corpses spoke eloquently of potential allies and alliances.’ The Vietnam War also presented new possibilities for alliances within the domestic United States. Notably, the Panthers argued that the forceful conscription of over two million American citizens, and the violent repression of anti-war activists, meant that white radicals were finally experiencing the imperial violence that was the normal condition of Black life in the ghetto (Bloom and Martin, 2016: 110–111).

Newton argued that the Vietnam War differed in important ways from previous US colonial conflicts. Whereas these involved the installation of military bases and Americans in leadership positions, the war in Vietnam was being fought in behalf of those seeking to enhance their power and position within the USA. On largely Leninist terms, Newton maintained that the USA’s imperial wars functioned to drive the capitalist economy, and in particular the interests of a small number of ‘super-capitalists’. In 1969, he argued that the peace movement was therefore ‘one of the important movements that’s going on’, because peace in Vietnam ‘would force a re-evaluation and a revolution in the basic economic composition of the country’ (Newton, 1970: 67). Accordingly, ‘if the peace movement is successful, then the revolution will be successful’ (Newton, 1970: 70). On these terms, the Panthers played a tentative but significant role in the flourishing anti-war movement.

Nevertheless, the Panthers were also deeply critical of the anti-war movement, primarily for its failure to contend with racialized violence within the USA. If the violence directed against Black people in the USA was indistinguishable from that directed against the Viet Cong, if both are sites of armed occupation, then why should anti-war politics focus on one and not the other? Why call for the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, and not from Detroit or Newark? In was on such terms that, in February 1968, Panther leader Bobby Seale told an anti-war audience that ‘you white people . . . can get 65,000 people to march against the war in Vietnam. Well, you better get 65,000 to march against the war against black people in your own backyard. We’re not going to march, we’re going to be defending ourselves’ (cited in Wilson, 2006: 203). These challenges were influential in pushing significant elements of the peace movement to recognize the interweaving of anti-racist and anti-militarist struggle (Bloom and Martin, 2016: 111). They also demand a reconceptualization of militarism. Insofar as the anti-war movement focused its attentions solely on the war in Vietnam, it operated with an account of militarism that maintained boundaries between the domestic and the international, and between sites of war and peace, that both normalized racialized violence within the USA and obscured the imperial continuities that rendered both Vietnamese and Black American lives disposable.
For their part, elements of the white-dominated anti-war movement sought to respond to the Panthers’ challenge. In response, and distinguishing themselves from other Black radical organizations of the time, the Panthers engaged in a series of tentative alliances with white-majority organizations. While these relationships stand as important examples of how apparent tensions between anti-racist and anti-war organizing can be navigated, their shortcomings also demonstrate the ease with which critical perspectives on militarism fail to contend with the intimacies and specificities through which war and racism intersect, both bracketing off and reproducing racism. They highlight the processes through which the concerns and interests of whiteness are rendered synonymous with militarism in a way that detracts from militarism’s cardinal predication on racist violence and colonial dispossession.

The first such relationship was formed between the BPP and the Peace and Freedom Party (PFP), a predominantly white anti-war and anti-racist organization (Wilson, 2006). At Cleaver’s urging, the two organizations reached an agreement in late 1967, whereby the Panthers would provide registered supporters and anti-racist credibility to the PFP, while the PFP would help the Panthers to raise funds in the wake of Newton’s recent arrest on murder charges. Key Panther figures would run for electoral positions under the PFP banner, with Cleaver as party candidate for US president (Bloom and Martin, 2016: 107–111). The alliance was rife with tensions from the start. While there were many reasons for this, a principle issue was that many within the PFP were uncomfortable allying themselves with Black militancy. These ‘pragmatists’ favoured a strategy for ending the Vietnam War that involved harnessing the anti-war attitudes of middle-class whites – those most likely to vote. While ostensibly committed to Black liberation, they felt that racism ‘could only be confronted after anti-war sentiment pulled middle-class whites leftward’ (Wilson, 2006: 209). By tying the PFP to the violent image of the Panthers, the alliance endangered this strategy.

The second close relationship the Panthers formed was with the burgeoning anti-war organization Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The SDS was a more radical organization than the PFP and proclaimed its support for the Panther platform with little reservation. In March 1969, the SDS national council meeting passed a resolution in which it declared the Panthers the vanguard of the Black revolution:

Within the Black liberation movement the vanguard force is the Black Panther party. Their development of an essentially correct programme for the Black community and their ability to organize Black people around this programme have brought them to this leadership. An especially important part of the Panther programme is the Black People’s Army – a military force to be used not only in the defence of the Black community but also for its liberation. (Students for a Democratic Society, 1969)

Statements like this enabled the SDS to demonstrate its revolutionary and anti-racist credentials. However, they failed to translate into substantive support for the Panther programme; as David Barber demonstrates, the SDS frequently ignored specific Panther requests for solidarity, revealing a contradiction ‘between the Panthers as real representatives of the black community . . . and the Panthers as vanguard representatives in the imagination of young white leftists’ (Barber, 2006: 238). The role of and imaginaries surrounding Panther militancy are central here. The statement above and others like it emphasize the BPP military programme and the party’s militancy precisely at a point where, in the face of brutal state repression, the party was trying to de-emphasize these and bring focus onto their community programmes. As 1969 progressed, the dominant factions within the SDS – most notably the Weathermen – quietly ceased championing the Panthers as vanguard. Tracing emerging splits within the BPP, these SDS splinters took inspiration and guidance from minority Black radical groups that continued to encourage militant action (Hale, 2011: 219).
In the relationships with both the PFP and the SDS, we see attitudes on the part of established anti-war politics that position the relationship between anti-militarism and anti-racism as contingent, as crowded out by the white left’s romanticized (read racialized) images of militancy. The PFP revealed those tendencies within the anti-war movement that saw anti-war and anti-racist organizing as separable, the latter as optional and potentially inconvenient. The SDS ostensibly embraced the BPP programme, but struggled to see the Panthers other than through particular and racialized images of militancy; the party was developing new tactics to respond to the war on the ghetto, but these appeared ill-equipped to match the fantasies projected onto the Panthers by many young white leftists (Hale, 2011: 221). Across these two examples, we see how the BPP’s unsettling of the conventional terms of militarism was blunted, first through the relegation of racialized, domestic, peacetime violence to a subordinate or optional domain, and then through racialized imaginaries that reduced the BPP account of social warfare to an image of Black militancy. These breakdowns are made possible by and reveal the violences that inhere in accounts of militarism that subordinate an analysis of racism and coloniality; that these can be bracketed out or so starkly reproduced signals a certain methodological whiteness in the terms through which militarism has been positioned in these cases. As Bhambra (2017) argues, ‘methodological whiteness’ is predicated on the commonsense assumption that ‘whiteness’ is the default position when it comes to knowledge generation and production. This universalizing of the ‘white’ perspective as the perspective elides the role played by race and racism in the very structuring of the world this perspective seeks to – ostensibly objectively – describe. Our argument is that the Panthers can help to develop conceptions of militarism that work against these dynamics. The following section outlines how such a conception emerges from the BPP analysis.

The war analogy

The Panthers’ attitude towards the Vietnam War and the peace movement was grounded in a broader analysis through which they made sense of the abject conditions of Black life in the USA. This analysis drew heavily on both Black nationalism and anti-colonial internationalism, connecting racist violence in the ghetto to global systems of extraction and exploitation. There are two conceptual moves in particular that we argue are pertinent for thinking about militarism from the perspective of the BPP.

The first of these, which drew on Black American figures like Malcolm X and Harold Cruse, as well as Third World anti-colonial writers including Frantz Fanon, was to recognize Black Americans as a colonized people, subjected to racist and economic violence by a totalitarian capitalist power (Abu-Jamal, 2019; Malloy, 2017: 18–45). Thus, rather than looking to the state apparatus or the liberal civil rights movement, the Panthers would aim to ‘make a coalition with every people in the world who has been fucked over by another people’ (Cleaver, cited in Malloy, 2017: 70), and insisted in their ten-point programme that ‘we will not fight and kill other people of color in the world who, like black people, are being victimized by the white racist government of America’ (Black Panther Party, 1970: 3). The second move the Panthers made here was to recognize the police as an occupying force within Black communities, a principle agent of that colonization, ‘the foot-soldiers in the trenches of the ghetto’ (Cleaver, 1968: 164).

Newton made sense of this colonial occupation as a condition of war. Drawing from Mao Zedong, he wrote that ‘politics is war without bloodshed. War is politics with bloodshed’ (Newton, 2019: 159). Just as it was waging war against the Viet Cong in Vietnam, the American state was waging war on Black people in the ghetto. In response to police brutality, racist criminalization and incarceration, political disenfranchisement, and government-aided-and-abetted poverty, the Panthers developed a raft of strategies. They started by conducting armed patrols of the police, in
an effort to both limit police aggression and empower the Black community to defend itself against state violence (Newton, 2009: 120–135). Over time, their attention turned towards establishing community survival programmes, including free healthcare, breakfasts for children, prison transport, legal advice and even medical research (Bloom and Martin, 2016: 179–198; Nelson, 2013). In a state of war, these strategies were seen as a necessary but insufficient means of surviving occupation, and ultimately for creating the conditions and social consciousness necessary for revolution and the overthrow of the colonial system. As aforementioned, the Panthers also sought alliances with other oppressed groups, including indigenous and Latinx movements, in recognition of common struggle against that racist, colonial, capitalist system (Malloy, 2017).

The Panthers’ colonial-war analogy has significant purchase for contemporary theorizing on militarism, focusing attention on the relationship between liberal polities and the multiple modalities of (racialized) violence they deploy. First and foremost, it targets and unsettles a series of conceptual relationships through which the violence of liberal societies is normalized and perpetuated. The most straightforward of these is the distinction between war and peace. The BPP was at pains to demonstrate how what is conventionally understood as a condition of peace, the normal functioning of domestic life within the US state, is in reality a condition of perpetual warfare. That quotidian police violence, mass incarceration, and deep economic exploitation and poverty are presented as conditions of peacetime reveals the inadequacy of the idea of peace as an opposition to declared war between states. In the words of Panther member George Jackson, ‘politics and war are inseparable in a fascist state’ (cited in Heiner, 2008: 313). This challenges other hierarchies that are constitutive of our understandings of war and peace. For instance, war is conventionally positioned as a site of exception, the departure from the normal conduct of political life, and as the concern of international life, as distinct from the domestic. The Panthers revealed how the apparent conditions of peace, normalcy and domesticity within the USA are rooted in and reliant on racial violence.

This challenge is most clear in the BPP’s refusal of distinctions between imperial troops abroad and police at home, distinctions that help subordinate the racist policing of Black Americans. If militarism as a concept is supposed to elucidate the social relations that make possible organized political violence (Rossdale, 2019: 3–5), then from a BPP perspective it must centre the exploitation and repression in the ghetto, instances par excellence of systemic political violence. To bracket out the experience of the state-sanctioned oppression of people of colour occludes racial violence, indeed makes its workings possible and even seamless. Above, we demonstrated that such elisions could be found within the peace movements of the 1960s (and continue today; see Rossdale, 2019: 199–200), but they are also present in academic work on militarism that overlooks or marginalizes racialized violence and police martiality (Mann, 1987; Stavrianakis and Selby, 2012b).

Nevertheless, the Panthers’ critique shares some affinities with post-structural and feminist accounts of militarism. These, too, have critiqued the ways violence is folded into and out of particular politicized distinctions between war and peace, normal and exceptional, domestic and international, revealing the martiality of supposedly non-martial politics (Basham, 2013; Der Derian, 2009; Enloe, 2000). However, while they do not absent race and colonialism per se, these are frequently relegated to secondary features rather than organizing structures. Feminist work often (but not always) foregrounds gender hierarchy as the principle determinant of militarism, thus earning bell hooks’ (1995: 61) pointed retort that ‘imperialism, not patriarchy, is the core foundation of militarism’. Post-structuralist and especially Foucauldian work, even if not explicitly expressed through the lexicon of militarism, encompasses similar concerns about the social ordering of political violence (Dillon, 2008; Evans, 2010; Neal, 2008). However, it betrays a curious absent presence with regard to race, coloniality and the Panthers. On the one hand, a recurrent critique of this work is to argue that while Foucauldian thought does foreground race in relation to war, the account
of race on which it is premised is a thin one, not grounded in colonial violence, instead ‘a sorting process after the fact of the establishment of biopower’ (Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2019: 5, emphasis in original). Accordingly, while post-structural accounts offer important insights into liberal violence, they struggle to engage racism and coloniality as foundational to this violence (Mbembe, 2003; Weheliye, 2014). On the other hand, as Brady Heiner (2008) demonstrates, Foucault’s thought on state violence and disciplinary power was heavily influenced by Panther figures George Jackson and Angela Davis and their writings on social warfare and carceral politics. In a pamphlet written after the state assassination of Jackson, Foucault (along with Catharine von Bülow and Daniel Defert) writes: ‘Jackson has already said it: What is happening in the prisons is war, a war having other fronts in the black ghettos, the arms, and the courts’ (Foucault et al., 2007: 140). The elision of substantive accounts of race and colonialism in Foucauldian work is thus accented by their quiet but foundational role in his theoretical project. Alexander Weheliye argues that this move signals how ‘white supremacy and coloniality still form the glue for the institutional and intellectual disciplinarity of western critical thought’. He continues:

Since the ideas of the BPP are limited to concerns with ethnic racism elsewhere, they do not register as thought qua thought, and can thus be exploited by and elevated to universality only in the hands of European thinkers such as Foucault, albeit without receiving any credit. (Weheliye, 2014: 63)

The affinities between Foucauldian and Panther approaches to militarism are in this sense not a coincidence, but signal a common foundation obscured by an epistemic injustice, or a wilful amnesia, in that Foucauldian work has been formulated through, and shaped by, the dynamics of racism and anti-Blackness, but these have either been obfuscated or canalized into one of many ‘subsets’ that animate the European project. In recognizing Panther struggle as a space for theorizing militarism, we are therefore returning to foundations on which disciplinary obscurations have proceeded.

In contrast to much of the feminist and post-structural work on militarism, then, what the Panthers do is underscore and foreground the imperial nature and racist contours of those martial hierarchies that conceal or subordinate state violence against marginalized subjects. They also, however, go a step further to demonstrate how these very hierarchies are produced through and predicated on this normalized violence. This is most fully fleshed out in their comparison of the war on Vietnam and that against Black people at home in the USA. But they extend it to analyses of seemingly distant cases, including the criminal justice system in the USA, the subjugation of indigenous resistance by Portuguese colonial forces in Mozambique, the use of imperial aggression in Cuba and the creation of a global lumpenproletariat, that ‘underclass’ of people – often racialized – uninterested in political organization and without revolutionary consciousness (Mokhtefi, 2018; Stallybrass, 1990). In all these instances, by spotlighting a diverse array of seemingly unconnected violent manifestations, the Panthers chip away at the distinction between the liberal, peaceful, domestic norm(al) and the warlike, international exception(al). The Panthers and scholars thinking with them show how such distinctions are rooted in and parasitic on anti-Blackness and capitalist exploitation (Davis, 2016a; Wang, 2018).

The Panthers thus impel us to read militarism through and as the processes by which liberal capitalist society is structured by warlike relations and as the strategies through which these relations are concealed, obscured or naturalized. Those processes of naturalization are at the same time a story of the operations of race, qua the violent ideological-material work of organizing and naturalizing difference/hierarchy (Lowe, 2016). Militarism in this account is intimately related to, and ultimately constitutive of, the racial liberal capitalist order. However, while this attention to how race structures distinctions between war and peace is crucial, it is not where we locate the
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A substantive Panther account of militarism. Rather, it makes possible a series of moves through which the Panthers identify and contend with emergent forms of militarism. These involve the interactions of racial capitalism, new dynamics of internationalism, and the dominance of police power. While these interactions are anticipated in early Panther analyses of internal colonization, they find fuller expression in Huey Newton’s theory of intercommunalism, first articulated in 1970. Here we find an important account of contemporary global militarism.

Intercommunalism

From late 1969 onwards, significant divisions begin to emerge within the BPP. While these splits were variously created and stoked by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation and other forces, they also traced important political differences. From exile in Cuba and then Algeria, Cleaver remained unrelenting in his advocacy of armed insurrection from within the imperial centre. Back in the USA, Newton began to conceptualize a new direction. In response to the intensifying state repression of the organization, but also recognizing the failures of the party’s existing strategies to foment revolution, he insisted that a new theoretical understanding of capitalism and the state was needed. The theory of intercommunalism was born, first outlined in detail during a speech at Boston College in 1970 (Newton, 2019: 173–188). In the second half of this article, we argue that Newton’s account of intercommunalism, directly informed by the racial politics of the Vietnam era, albeit with a change in emphasis, represents an essential contribution to debates on anti-militarism and the possibility of liberation and solidarity in a world structured through empire. Furthermore, we argue that intercommunalism provides valuable tools for understanding the nature of contemporary militarism, especially insofar as it directs attention to the interactions of racial capitalism, the shifting nature of the state and bordering practices, and the role of police power. We first introduce Newton’s theory, before setting out how intercommunalism frames these three dimensions. In the last pages, we demonstrate how an intercommunal theory of militarism works in the context of US–Israel relations, just as the Vietnam experience shaped the colonial-war analogy, and outline how intercommunalism also urges a turn towards insurgent practices of radical solidarity.

In 1967, Newton was arrested and charged with murder of a police officer. Although his subsequent conviction of voluntary manslaughter would later be overturned, this was not before he had spent two years in prison. During this time, he reflected on how evolving strategic and political conditions were inhibiting the BPP’s revolutionary project. In spite of mass mobilizations and bold promises, the material conditions for those in the ghetto remained broadly unchanged, while the state appeared more determined than ever to treat Black people like enemy combatants, now employing tactics first trialled in Vietnam (Tullis, 1999). Meanwhile, it seemed that the revolutionary credentials of the Panthers’ allies in the Third World were warping as they became ensnared in Cold War geopolitics. Some, especially those who aspired to state power themselves, became notably more wary of allying themselves with a revolutionary organization that posed a direct challenge to the US government (Malloy, 2017: 203–207). It was in this context that Newton theorized a new stage in global, imperial relations of capitalist production: intercommunalism.

Newton argued that the United States is better understood not as a state but as an empire that, owing to an unparalleled concentration of military might, economic wealth and political power, had ‘transformed itself into a power controlling all the world’s lands and people’ (Newton, 2019: 199, emphasis in original). The aggressive spread of production and consumption chains was embedding capitalism across the world, shifting ‘the practice of imperial rule from the occupation of land and native populations to the spread of technology, markets and potential consumers’ (Narayan, 2019: 63). These networks and technologies superseded and undermined state boundaries, in such a way that for Newton the nation-state had ceased to function as a reference point for
politics: ‘because of the fact that the United States is no longer a nation but an empire, nations could not exist, for they did not have the criteria for nationhood. . . . These transformations and phenomena require us to call ourselves “intercommunalists” because nations have been transformed into communities of the world’ (Newton, 2019: 183, emphasis in original). In this new environment, decolonization no longer made sense; the countries that had gained formal independence from their European overlords remained subject to US-backed capitalist control. As John Narayan (2017, 2019) argues, this account portends contemporary debates about the politics of neoliberal globalization. It also has significant implications for how we think about both militarism and international solidarity.

This new perspective on global power relations had a profound effect on how Newton theorized revolution. Wary of the dangers of nostalgia for New Deal liberalism and its imperial foundations, and suspicious of revolutionary nationalism’s racialized divisions in the face of empire, Newton urged a move towards ‘revolutionary intercommunalism’: ‘It is true that the world is one community, but we are not satisfied with the concentration of its power. We want the power for the people’ (Newton, 2019: 187). The retreat of the state must therefore be met with the cultivation of new forms of community, as well as new forms of relations with other communities subject to empire, en route to ‘a place where people will be happy, wars will end, the state itself will no longer exist, and we will have communism’ (Newton, 2019: 188). A revolutionary organization should focus on revealing the fiction of state power as a route to liberation and generate ‘alternative ways of life, both institutionally and ideologically, to the racially divisive, class exploitative and gendered structures of capitalist society’ (Narayan, 2017: 2494).

**Intercommunalism and militarism**

The first half of this article set out how the BPP called attention to the warlike nature of liberal capitalist society, so highlighting the racialized violence concealed through accounts of militarism that maintain boundaries between domestic and international, war and peace. Newton’s theory of intercommunalism allows us to develop this account further. There are three interlinked moves we find particularly productive: the first, to ground understandings of militarism in terms of racial capitalism; the second, as the state’s role recedes, to look for both the privatization of martial politics and violent practices of bordering and unbordering; the third, to centre policing as a cardinal practice of global militarism.

**Racial capitalism**

The BPP always paid attention to the mutually constitutive nature of capitalism and white supremacy, with Newton (2019: 160) stating in 1969 that the ‘white racist oppresses Black people for reasons not only related to racism, but also [because] it is economically profitable to do so’. Intercommunalism pushes these early accounts of racial capitalism further by anticipating the probable effects of the globalization of production alongside the decreasing importance of state borders. As a single imperial logic draws new places and subjects into capitalist markets, and expands through the use of technology rather than labour power, Newton anticipates a weakened proletariat and sharp rise in labour precarity. These changes are likely to be accompanied by an intensification of racial division (especially as white working classes in the global North experience the precarity from which they had been largely protected in the postwar settlement) and violence in the service of those expanding market imperatives and their contradictions (Narayan, 2017; Newton, 2019: 271–281). Narayan frames Newton’s argument here as an account of racial capitalism, a concept that compels reflection both on the ways in which capitalist formations are
always shaped by, reliant on and generative of racialized difference, and on how racialized difference is provoked by and yet constitutive of capitalist relations (Narayan, 2017; see also Robinson, [1983] 2000).

The Panthers demonstrated that organized political violence is carried out globally in the service of empire, from Cuba to Algeria, from Detroit to Palestine, from the ghetto to Vietnam. While there are differences in the particular capitalist imperatives and racialized logics in play across these spaces, they are linked through their co-implication in a global system of racial capitalism. It is here that militarism and racial capitalism appear as deeply interlinked. Racial capitalism both authorizes and demands a plethora of violences, both formal and informal, public and private, quotidian and spectacular. The legitimation of such violence is rarely free from a double investment in logics of both race and capital, although the mix may vary. Racial capitalism is also produced through such violence, which makes and naturalizes raced difference, enlists and gratifies whiteness, and makes possible the expropriation, exploitation and expulsion on which accumulation is reliant (Bhattacharyya, 2018). Militarism is co-constitutive with racial capitalism, shaped through and productive of racialized difference and capitalist formations.

An account of militarism alongside racial capitalism folds in a wide array of sites and practices. And so we might look to both private and public violence wielded in the service of extraction and expulsion in neoliberal and settler-colonial practices in South America (Veltmeyer, 2013); at hi-tech arms production in the European Union, which makes possible particular military interventions and a racial compact with particular sections of the working class domestically (Stavrianakis, 2016); and, of course, at martial policing and racist carceral violence within the USA as a solution to labour precarity and unrest (Davis, 2016a; Jackson, 2016; Kelley, 2016). Across all of these examples, racial capitalism both compels and is remade by particular formations of militarism. The point therefore is not to argue that there is a single logic of racial capitalism that obtains everywhere (Bhattacharyya, 2018: 8), and so a universal politics of militarism. Rather, it is to acknowledge that particular logics of race and capital emerge from and remake their (and other) context(s), and thus that militarism cannot be made sense of outside of particular constellations of racial capitalism.

The state

Intercommunalism is predicated on the idea that the nation-state is no longer a stable referent for political analysis or liberation: the integration of global imperial relations means that particular nations no longer have meaningful autonomy – if indeed they ever did. Newton (2019: 271–281) conceived of this as a process of both smoothing and fracturing. The integration of global technologies and production chains was dissolving boundaries between states, and between political domains of public and private. However, that centripetal coming together of empire also fractures communities, intensifies racialized difference and breaks down solidarities. For powerful elites, the state and its borders have ceased to function as the sovereign centre of politics, while persisting as concentrations of power and sites of violent governance. In Newton’s ([1974] 2018) words, ‘there is a class among the plurality of competing interest groups which enjoys a predominance of power and can establish its own outlook as a prevailing ideology and . . . these interests are expansionist, anti-revolutionary, and tending to be militarist by nature’. Practices of bordering and unbordering emerge not as the assertion or recession of naturalized entities, but as contingent exercises of power by transnational elites in the service of racial capitalism.

Within the context of contemporary militarism, these uneven transformations in the modalities of relation between state-spaces, and between states and capital, are fundamental. The organization of imperial political violence is an intensely transnational (or intercommunal) phenomenon, formed
through cross-border partnerships in training, research and development, and military interventions (Stavrianakis and Selby, 2012a: 15). Emerging technologies, including drones, facilitate new practices of surveillance and warfare that subvert, transform or straightforwardly ignore conventional state borders, furthering colonial practices that enforce racialized hierarchies of capacity, knowledge and sovereignty (Agius, 2017: 371–375; see also Graham, 2018). And martial practices lie increasingly out of the hands of states, subcontracted to private police forces, security consultants, border guards and armies for an expanding array of tasks previously regarded as exclusively within the purview of states (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2010). Nevertheless, at the same time as the state’s role and its borders seem to recede, we also see an intensification of bordering practices, which govern and limit the movement of populations, frequently in a manner that exemplifies racial capitalism’s drive towards abjection. Bordering is a central practice of contemporary militarism and racial capitalism, the vulnerability or desirability of particular borders (and the subjects they include and exclude) a principle incitement to violence, and the martial governance of borders – both at delineated border zones and throughout society – a concerted practice of both public and private actors (Torres, 2015). Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018: 128–129) points out that the ongoing acceleration in bordering practices actually signifies the weakness, rather than strength, of contemporary states. Sites and relations of (un)bordering thereby provide fecund terrain for, inter alia, an enquiry into the limits of the state vis-a-vis intercommunalism, as well as being host to some of the most violent imbrications of colonialism and capitalism (Walia, 2013).

**Policing**

Newton’s account of intercommunalism was grounded in the analysis of the police and policing that characterized earlier Panther understandings. In the Boston speech, he reiterated that position, arguing that ‘the “police” are everywhere and they all wear the same uniform and use the same tools, and have the same purpose: the protection of the ruling circle here in North America’ (Newton, 2019: 187). However, he develops this point by noting that ‘the ruling circle no longer even acknowledges wars; they call them “police actions”. They call the riots of the Vietnamese people “domestic disturbance” ’ (Newton, 2019: 186). In so doing, he recognizes the centrality of policing to this new phase of empire. Here, we suggest that the Panther account of policing should be integral to an intercommunal theory of militarism.

Alison Howell’s important critique of the literature on ‘militarization’ points out that accounts of police militarization that imply prior histories of non-militarized police are both ahistorical and in danger of eliding violence against marginalized subjects. The original formation of police forces in imperial metropoles was a boomerang effect of violent colonial governance, and police forces have always been implicated in ‘war-like relations with Indigenous, racialized, disabled, poor and other communities’ (Howell, 2018: 117). The Panthers were firmly aware that US police forces engaged in warlike relations with Black Americans, as the earlier parts of this article outlined. Certainly, accounts of militarism that do not pay sufficient attention to the martial politics of the police are complicit in erasing the kinds of violence towards which marginalized subjects are likely to be subjected. But there is a broader reason why an account of policing may be so important to our account of militarism and intercommunalism.

It is possible that policing is a more integral concept for contemporary militarism than war. This is not to suggest that wars of many types are not ongoing, but that their function is more effectively captured through the processes and imperatives of policing. To make this argument, we follow Mark Neocleous (2014: 10–11) in moving beyond the analysis of those such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000: 12–13) who have argued that war has become ‘banalized’ or ‘reduced’ to the status of police action, and rather recognize global martial politics as concerned with a series of
technologies and practices directed towards producing and maintaining capitalist order, pacifying unruly, disobedient and criminalized subjects. This is a matter not only of the police, but of a ‘whole range of technologies [that] form the social order’ (Neocleous, 2014: 14). Across collapsing boundaries between state and private actors, between war and peace, between domestic and international, police power remains the central means by which social and structural violence is administered and maintained. This article opened by outlining how the Panthers recognized the continuities between the use of force in Vietnam and in the ghetto; it is insofar as intercommunalism further dissolves the distinctions between policing at home and war abroad, and places emphasis on the role of new technologies in the service of neoliberal globalization, that they chart new global relations of police power, placing these at the heart of militarism.

Much as we wish to avoid methodologically nationalist accounts, our intention here is also not towards a singular global theory of militarism. Rather, we want to suggest that a Panther-informed, intercommunal theory of militarism should pay attention to the interactions of racial capital, state bordering and unbordering, and the operations of police power. Their interplay offers a route to understanding militarism that recognizes the centrality of racial capitalism. This account of the intercommunal politics of contemporary militarism is strongly evinced in the relationship between the USA and Israel. In the final section, we introduce key examples that highlight the interaction of racial capitalism, un/bordering and police power in this context, before concluding by outlining how such a framing makes space for intercommunal forms of anti-militarist resistance.

**Intercommunal militarism in the Israel–US Relationship**

The US-supported Israeli victory in the Six Day War of 1967 and the subsequent occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip led many American Black radicals to view the Palestinian struggle as intimately related to their own. Through Cleaver’s international section, the BPP built a positive relationship with the Palestine Liberation Organization, with Cleaver on one occasion sharing a stage with Yasser Arafat and proclaiming that the ‘Black Panther Party unequivocally supports the Palestinian people and their Vanguard forces in their struggle against the Zionist aggressor’ (cited in Malloy, 2017: 146). In September 1970, Newton (1972: 196) issued a statement in which he insisted that the Panthers ‘support the Palestinian’s just struggle for liberation one hundred percent’.

The support that emerged from Cleaver’s circles was more in tune with the party’s established rhetoric. When international section member Donald Cox was invited by Fatah to address a Palestine student conference, he proclaimed: ‘The young fedayeen being trained in the camps, on the battlefields, held captive, these are our revolutionary brothers. The young brothers in the ghettos of the US are our fedayeen’ (cited in Malloy, 2017: 146). While Newton would not necessarily disavow this frame, his statement on Palestine also showcases how a theory of intercommunalism recognizes the paradoxical need for, and limits of, nationalist politics. He claimed that the Panthers must embrace the struggle for Palestinian nationalism, but this was necessarily a strategic rather than an unequivocal embrace:

> Self-determination and national independence cannot really exist while United States imperialism is alive. That is why we don’t support nationalism as our goal. In some instances we might support nationalism as a strategy; we call this revolutionary nationalism. The motives are internationalist because the revolutionaries are attempting to secure liberated territory in order to choke imperialism by cutting them off from the countryside. (Newton, 1972: 195)

In an intercommunal world where US empire renders national liberation a chimera, the importance of ‘liberated territory’ becomes paramount, and a way to recognize the importance of land without
capitulating to a nationalist framework. Newton therefore sought to pivot the revolutionary struggle away from a narrow focus on the nation-state and towards communities under siege from empire (Narayan, 2020). The USA’s relationship to and support for Israel was therefore already indicative of the need for something different from, and more radical than, the creation of an independent nation-state in Palestine.2

Contemporary relations between the USA and Israel can be read through an intercommunal theory of militarism, tracing the three strands identified in the previous section: First, we see the dissolving of state boundaries for powerful actors, including arms companies and police forces, alongside ever more violent bordering practices directed against racialized others. Second, there is the function of police and policing as tactics of martial governance within a transnational or intercommunal environment: the police take on the mantle of a force without borders, engaging in warlike relations with those deemed a threat to social order. And third, both police power and un/bordering operate within a racial capitalist context, which simultaneously impels and is continually remade by these forces. Two examples illustrate these dynamics.

The Israeli arms company Elbit Systems’ association with the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agency demonstrates the imbrication of public and private actors and new technologies in the martial and racist policing of US border spaces. As Stephen Graham (2018: 84) shows, the Department of Homeland Security ‘routinely refers to the US–Mexico border in the same language that the US military uses to describe its war zones: a limitless “battlespace” encompassing a world where civilian life camouflages “targets” and where drones and other high-tech surveillance systems are the key to “persistent situational awareness” achieved through “network centric operations”.

A 2019 report at the Intercept looks at surveillance systems installed on the Tohono O’odham Nation’s reservation in Arizona, one mile away from the Mexico border. It demonstrates how the CBP has worked closely with Elbit Systems to construct ten 160-foot surveillance towers across the reservation, each capable of monitoring all people and vehicles within a radius of seven and a half miles. The towers ‘will be outfitted with high-definition cameras with night vision, thermal sensors, and ground-sweeping radar, all of which will feed real-time data to Border Patrol agents at a central operating station in Ajo, Arizona’. In addition, the towers will contain an archive with the ability to track and rewind each individual’s movement across time and space, a function ominously known as ‘wide-area persistent surveillance’ (Parrish, 2019).

The project is valued at $26 million and is only one among many such endeavours. The US branch of Elbit Systems has already built 55 integrated towers in southern Arizona and has also deployed 368 smaller surveillance towers across the country from the south of San Diego to the Rio Grande Valle and along the US–Canadian border. The logic for choosing an Israeli company headquartered in Haifa is clear. Founded in 1967, Elbit boasts over 40 years of ‘field proven operational experience’ and is a ‘world leader in border defense and control management systems’ (Elbit Systems, 2016). While the surveillance system is framed within the technocratic and neutral vernacular of smart borders, the result is a violent and coercive practice that not only targets those attempting to cross the border, but also indigenous people on the reservation and others deemed a threat to social order. Elbit’s role is central here. It is a key node of the border militarism industry, having perfected its lethal technologies in Palestine ready for export to the rest of the world. The Palestinian territories and US borderlands both operate as ‘laboratories for new systems of enforcement and control’, where advancements in bordering and policing practices and technologies are developed and circulated globally (Parrish, 2019). They are also sites where a ‘homeland-industrial security complex’, of which Elbit is one of many examples, harnesses racist rhetoric to promote
hi-tech fantasies of social order – weaponized pacification through and in defence of racial capitalism (Graham, 2018: 67–94). Here, we see martial bordering practices shaped through while further entrenching transnational, colonial and racial capitalist networks; it is precisely such dynamics to which an intercommunal theory of militarism calls attention.

A second but linked example is provided by the relationships between Israeli actors and US police forces. The USA’s enabling and shaping of the occupation of Palestine was never only a one-way street: technologies and techniques developed through occupation also structure US policing. Since 2001, US government agencies, together with non-profit groups like the Anti-Defamation League, have sponsored police seminars for American police officers to learn from and build on Israeli expertise. Hundreds of law enforcement officials from across the USA have travelled to Israel for training in ‘effective counterterrorism techniques’, while thousands of others have attended conferences with Israeli experts within the USA (Pomerantz, 2020; see also Amnesty International, 2016). Through these extensive programmes, Israeli expertise has shaped the policing of racialized communities within and beyond the USA, informing new tactics in counterinsurgency, urban warfare, crowd control, interrogation, surveillance, and more (Halper, 2015: 250–263). US police forces have also bought ‘battle-tested’ weaponry from Israeli firms, such as the putrid-smelling ‘skunk’ liquid, developed through collaboration between Israeli police and the scent-based weapons company Odortec, widely deployed and refined through use against Palestinians, and then stockpiled by the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department in the wake of the 2014 uprisings in Ferguson that followed the police killing of Michael Brown (Tucker, 2015). These and other connections lead Graham (2010: 259) to observe that ‘the emerging security–military–industrial complexes of the two nations are becoming umbilically connected, so much so that it might now be reasonable to consider them as a single diversified, transnational entity’. This is precisely Newton’s observation in laying out his theory of intercommunalism: the emergence of capitalist imperial formations that supplant the state form. The martial and racial projects of occupation and policing are co-implicated even as they impose distinct logics of violence and disposability.

These mutually reinforcing relations of racial capitalism and militarism are by no means unique to the US–Israel relationship. Both states are embedded in networks of circulation through which martial technologies, hardware and expertise proliferate across the world. The Israeli military has trained police forces from Brazil, the United Kingdom and India (Gross, 2015; Machold, 2016). Only recently, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi received ‘tips’ from his counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu on how to quell dissent in Kashmir after his Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janta Party revoked Kashmir’s special status and staged a military occupation (Wire, 2019). Meanwhile, the USA has long supplied the world with military technology, trained police and armed forces, and has been at the forefront of blurring boundaries between military and police action (Howell, 2018; Schrader, 2019).

Conclusion

Intercommunalism has purchase as a concept not only insofar as it accounts for relations of power and the constraints of the system, but because it provides fertile ground for resistance. As Angela Davis (2016b) argues, contemporary relations between Black activists in the USA and Palestinian resistance see the forging of transnational anti-racist and anti-colonial solidarities. Faced with the decline of nation-states and the emergence of a global ‘reactionary’ intercommunalism, Newton conceptualized ‘revolutionary intercommunalism’, the cultivation of new forms of community and solidarity, built on the edifice of liberated territory, which subverted and transcended the nation-state. Locally for the BPP, this turn entailed an intensified focus on its survival programmes, designed to protect and nurture communities away from the frame of the nation-state. And while, in the face of massive state repression
and internal splits, the party never fully explored the global possibilities of revolutionary intercommunalism, it is a concept that offers much for thinking about anti-militarist formations.

In 2014, after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Israel’s 50-day war in the Gaza Strip became a call to arms for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Activists highlighted the similarities between the mass incarceration and police killing of Black populations within the USA and Gaza’s situation as an open-air prison. Protesters across the USA chanted ‘from Ferguson to Palestine, occupation is a crime’ and stressed the connection between the two struggles (Bailey, 2015). For their part, Palestinians reacted to the violent policing of activists in Ferguson by Tweeting advice for minimizing injuries in the face of police deployment of tear gas, demonstrating that technologies developed within an intercommunal world can be adapted in the service of revolution (Baker, 2014). Noura Erakat (2020: 473) observes that this ‘Ferguson–Gaza moment’ has developed into a sustained movement, featuring ‘delegations to the region, knowledge production, cultural work, and joint protest targeting the exchange of military and carceral technologies between the United States and Israel’, and culminating ‘in the summer of 2016, when the [BLM] movement endorsed Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) as part of its policy Platform for Black Lives’. Erakat notes that there is nothing inevitable or natural about this solidarity, which she indicates is often inhibited by anti-Blackness within the Palestinian freedom struggle, but nonetheless argues that practical experiences of organizing in opposition to white supremacy have served to generate transnational and anti-imperial relationships.

It is important to acknowledge that such relations and connections are often tenuous, difficult to institutionalize, and have a propensity to be overstated. These are not obviously the starting points of a new global revolution. In his extensive study of BPP internationalism, Sean L. Malloy (2017) shows that the Panthers constantly struggled to find a workable balance of practical local politics and global solidarity, even as they adopted one of the most radical and successful internationalist platforms of the era. And yet, as Narayan (2017) argues, it is insofar as contemporary movements are able to generate solidarities and subjectivities that transcend state and nation that the possibilities for new worlds emerge. These solidarities open up avenues for challenging militarism. Movements that are intensely cognizant of the continuities in global violence and the operations of racial capitalism are on the rise. These movements recognize and are indeed a response to the fact that social warfare structures ‘liberal’ societies, and that 21st century militarism is a distinctly intercommunal phenomenon. Perhaps today more than ever, then, the Panthers’ relentless focus on and radical response to the imbrications of capitalist, racist and imperial violence serve as a powerful guide for understanding global relations of power and insurgent spaces of possibility.

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Notes

1. We focus here on tensions between the Panthers and white-majority groups who dominated anti-war politics, but the movement was broad and heterogeneous, notably including emergent Asian American radical groups who built close relations with the Panthers, understood the inseparability of anti-racist and anti-militarist struggle, and so criticized the mainstream peace movement on similar grounds to those outlined here (Maeda, 2009: 73–126).

2. For a detailed account of how the BPP related to Palestinian struggle, see Fischbach (2019: 111–129).

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