Suicide or ‘Revolutionary’ Sacrifice?: Complicating the Deaths at Jonestown

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There is an old African saying, “I am we.” If you met an African in ancient times and asked him who he was, he would reply, “I am we.” This is revolutionary suicide: I, we, all of us are the one and the multitude.

—Huey P. Newton (1973)

We got tired. We didn’t commit suicide, we committed an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world.

—Jim Jones (last words, Nov 18, 1978)

On November 18, 1978, in Jonestown, Guyana, over six hundred men and women and over two hundred children drank cyanide-laced grape punch and died in one of the largest mass murder/suicides in history. The popular account of this tragedy generally states that these American citizens—the majority of whom were African-American—were brainwashed members of a religious cult led by Jim Jones, who ordered them to commit suicide on suspicion of an external threat by the U.S. government, who had been investigating the church on claims made by People’s Temple members’ families that Jonestown
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members were being prevented from leaving the community. This is only part of the story; the rest is more complex.

Jonestown was an agricultural community set up in a cleared section of Guyanese jungle in the mid-1970s, as a racially-integrated, intentional community and utopian extension of the communist/socialist-based religious ideology of the Peoples’ Temple, founded by the Reverend Jim Jones, in 1956. Temple membership had reached its peak by the 1970s in California when, following a media investigation and firebombing of the San Francisco Temple, hundreds of members left in a ‘mass exodus’ for Guyana, on Jim Jones’ orders, to live their way of life free from outside interference.

Reducing the deaths at Jonestown to their sensational aspects renders the events leading up to November 18, 1978 virtually meaningless. Under these conditions, oversimplified notions of cults, brainwashing, the “charismatic leader,” conspiracies, and mind-control experiments can be advanced, all designed to comfort a disbelieving and confused public with easily-digestible answers to otherwise complex questions. This oversimplification dehumanizes those who died. We must begin any analysis of Jonestown and the People’s Temple by humanizing them; by considering them as people who believed in what they were doing. Labelling Temple members as “crazy” does nothing to help illuminate the wider set of social circumstances, which eventually led to this extreme collective act. Jonestown and the People’s Temple, its leader, and its racially diverse—but primarily African-American—membership
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have been the source of serious scholarly and journalistic debate and conjecture. Despite this, there is so far little agreement about what actually happened in Jonestown and, more importantly, why it happened. How could over six hundred people collectively and willingly take their own lives? And even if that number is inaccurate, it seems probable that a sizeable number of Jonestown residents voluntarily took—or gave—their own lives (along with the lives of their children) that day in Guyana for something they fervently believed in. The sheer scope of the written material and diverse theories regarding the People’s Temple and Jonestown make a complete analysis difficult: therefore, for the purposes of this essay I will focus on the connection between the rhetoric of “revolutionary suicide” (as adopted by Jim Jones from Huey P. Newton and the Black Panther Party), the writings of Emile Durkheim on the sociological meanings or motivations for suicide, and in particular, altruistic suicide, from which Newton and the predominantly African-American membership at Jonestown drew inspiration. Though there are no easy answers, there is most certainly a connection between the willingness to commit suicide in defence of an ultimate concern (such as racial equality, or the collective) and the experience of the African-American members before and after joining the People’s Temple.

The People’s Temple began to blossom in a post-sixties atmosphere of hopelessness, especially for African-Americans, who, at the end of the sixties’ Civil Rights movement, had witnessed the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm
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X, Medgar Evers, and Robert Kennedy, all of whom had championed either racial equality, racial integration, or human/American rights for blacks. The seventies were, in a sense, a decade marked by paranoia on both public and government levels (see Wheen). It is not surprising that people found themselves joining a socially conscious, action-oriented religious organization, committed to improving social conditions for oppressed or marginalized Americans. African-Americans made up the bulk of Temple church membership, initially joining due to the early social programs offered by the church and Jim Jones, which consisted of “nine homes for the elderly, six homes for foster children, assistance in negotiating the American welfare system, and a ranch for the mentally [challenged]” (Wessinger 35). The People’s Temple’s integrationist mandate made it all the more attractive as a church and as a way of life. They were clearly doing good things for the community. However, by the time members were living in Jonestown, the dualistic, apocalyptic mentality of the church was in full swing, having first begun in San Francisco where their church building was fire-bombed by white racists, followed by a media campaign against the People’s Temple, which drew public and government support, including various official investigations (Wessinger 39). These circumstances, despite Jones’ deteriorating mental and physical health, would have enabled Temple members to continue to believe they were under attack by the outside world, as well as believe Jones’ assertion that the end of the world (as they knew it) was imminent (Wessinger 38). They certainly had

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reason to believe that their way of life was under attack, as they had witnessed it prior to the mass exodus to Jonestown. Furthermore, the isolated conditions and information-control measures enforced by Jones made it virtually impossible to know otherwise.

Not only were they being attacked from the outside, but internal dissent and Jones’ deteriorating health and questionable ranting were causing more strife and confusion among members (Wessinger 41, 43). They were caught “in a vise... where the African-American residents of Jonestown did not see returning to racist America and ghetto life as a viable option [and the] white members did not want to be disloyal to the [black members] and their shared ideal of multiracial justice and harmony” (41). The members who defected were primarily white and had the necessary “social and financial resources” to do so, while the African-American members, for the most part, did not (45). The defectors were demonized and considered traitors for betraying one of the church’s primary tenets: the preservation of the collective (46). Things got progressively worse within Jonestown and paranoia increased, prompting members “to carry out or overlook coercive measures to control dissidents,” which often involved physical abuse (46). People spoke of being ready to die, commit revolutionary suicide, and protect their ultimate values, rather than continue to live in fear of the external and internal threats and uncertainties (46). The people of Jonestown, including their leader, appeared to be failing. Even without Jones’ urging, self-destruction became an increasingly viable
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option for preserving their way of life, rather than watching it be destroyed by forces outside of their control.

Emile Durkheim’s concept of altruistic suicide is helpful in gaining a deeper (and potentially more authentic) understanding of how over six hundred people could have knowingly made the choice to commit collective suicide. Durkheim’s basic theory of altruistic suicide posits that, unlike egoistic suicide (resulting from “excessive individuation”), “insufficient individuation” (resulting from over-integration into a group) can lead to suicide (217). Drawing on several religions and historical examples, Durkheim illustrates the often duty-bound nature of altruistic suicide, showing that in certain social or religious groups, one is “dishonoured and also punished” if they fail to commit this obligatory act (219). It is not that people are forced to commit suicide, but rather that the weight of a particular society is “brought to bear on” someone, leading them to destroy themselves, because they have been absorbed into the collective and given up their individuality to the cause (Durkheim 221). This cause “compels and is the author of conditions and circumstances [that make] this obligation coercive”—yet “coercive” in the sense that this member belongs to a society that is a collective entity with an ultimate concern for which all are prepared to lay down their lives (220). In other words, altruistic suicide is a sacrifice “imposed by society for social ends,” and this definition appears to match what happened at Jonestown (220).

Due to the numerous suicide rehearsals in Guyana, the members were well aware that one day they might commit
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collective suicide, whether they welcomed or rejected that possibility. For the most part, they participated willingly, which makes sense given that they had willingly become part of the collective community. And everything, including one’s individuality, had become secondary to the collective. This is common in relatively small, isolated groups where, according to Durkheim, “collective supervision is constant, extending to everything,” preventing divergences (221). Societies and groups set up in this manner are designed to strip people of their individual desires and concerns in order to create a “compact, continuous mass” devoted exclusively to ideals beyond themselves (221). Though this method is common in such groups, it should not be confused with “brainwashing,” which concept does not explain much in the case of the People’s Temple (221). Due to preparations for the event, Jonestown members came to believe in suicide not only as a potential necessity in the face of threats from external influences, but also as an act of preserving hope. This hope depended “on the belief in beautiful perspectives beyond this life [and] implies enthusiasm and the spur of a faith eagerly seeking satisfaction, affirming itself by acts of extreme energy ... For when such persons renounce life, it is for something they love better than themselves” (Durkheim 225-6; 228). In the case of the People’s Temple, that ‘something’ was their communal equality—something they had not enjoyed in racist American society. Their collective was such a precious and hard-won commodity that, when threatened by its potential or perceived destruction
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by outside forces, they were willing to collectively take their own lives to preserve it.

Ivan Strenski’s excellent article on Muslim human bombers and the idea of sacrifice versus suicide expands on Durkheim’s theory by asking us to consider the difference between taking one’s life and giving one’s life for a larger cause. In the deaths at Jonestown, the very word ‘suicide’ does not even apply, according to Strenski, because the act was a “defined social role ... heavily regulated by communal standards,” and a sign of “selflessness and devotion to the community’s defence” (12). Moreover, Strenski stresses that it is “never an individual act voluntarily undertaken on one’s own authority” (Strenski 12). This complicates the act and the meaning of the deaths at Jonestown because it implies both a voluntary and involuntary sacrifice, a giving up of one’s life willingly for a greater cause, but also relying on another’s authority to carry it out. This means that one cannot claim that people committed suicide because they were brainwashed by Jim Jones, but rather because they saw him as an ultimate authority. It also means that ‘suicide’ cannot be used as an accurate description of the deaths at Jonestown. But can they be called a ‘sacrifice’ or a giving of oneself? And if so, why?

The term ‘revolutionary suicide’ was used with great frequency by Jim Jones and the members of People’s Temple, even in the last words on the infamous ‘death tape.’ The term had been borrowed directly from Huey P. Newton, who was the Defence Minister of the Black Panther Party in the United States
Suicide or ‘Revolutionary’ Sacrifice? (Chidester 129). It is entirely likely that the African-American members of People’s Temple had heard of Newton and had come across his writings and ideology. The Black Panther Party was a political group, considered radical, similar to the People’s Temple in communist and communitarian ideology, and which likewise focused on the black community. While in prison, Newton had studied Durkheim’s notion of altruistic suicide and saw giving one’s life as a necessary price in the fight for racial equality (Newton 4). Newton saw the revolutionary as an already “doomed man,” and believed that revolution entailed a kind of agreement to sacrifice oneself for the revolutionary cause (5). Unlike Jones, though, he was not advocating collective suicide, so much as the notion that one should not “expect to live through” the revolution (5).

There are other subtle, yet important, differences between Newton and Jones’ concepts of revolutionary suicide. For Jones, it provided the means to test the loyalty of People’s Temple members (hence the many “White Nights” suicide rehearsals), as well as providing the glue which held the community together (Chidester 130; 132). For Newton, revolutionary suicide was “a radical attempt to maintain human dignity by fighting the forces of oppression even to death, [which embraced] the certainty of death in the militant struggle for liberation against the overwhelming forces of oppression” (Chidester 129). For Jones, revolutionary suicide was “imagined as a way of life and as a way of death within the worldview of the People’s Temple,” as well as a “strategy designed to symbolically invert the dehumanizing
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subclassifications of oppression, racism, and poverty by claiming an eternal, superhuman immortality through revolutionary action” (Chidester 129-30). In other words, giving up one’s life for the cause meant that all previous dehumanization, racism, and oppression would be symbolically transformed into something human, or superhuman, and thus laden with meaning and purpose. Revolutionary suicide was the “salvation promised” through the act of self-sacrifice (130).

Newton saw revolutionary suicide as preferential to what he called *reactionary suicide*, the “more painful and degrading... spiritual death” that African-Americans had endured for centuries:

The common attitude has long been: What’s the use? If a man rises up against a power as great as the United States, he will not survive. Believing this, many Blacks have been driven to a death of the spirit rather than of the flesh, lapsing into lives of quiet desperation. (4)

Revolutionary (as opposed to reactionary) suicide gave power back to the people from whom it was originally taken, and offered them control over “when and how [they] will go to the grave” (Newton 333)—a control that Jones repeatedly preached in his sermons. It is entirely possible that the African-American members of Jonestown, perhaps having begun to lose faith in an increasingly mentally unstable leader, still believed in Newton’s version of dying a dignified, humanizing death for their religious or socialist cause, rather than returning to a society that continued to treat them as subhuman.
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Painting a more positive portrait of Jonestown is not to condone what occurred there, but rather to bring some light to the complex circumstances that led over six hundred people to commit collective suicide. This relies on examining some limitations of the word ‘suicide’ and the meanings of taking one’s life versus giving or sacrificing it for a cause one believes in. Even if we are unable to understand the whole story, maybe we can understand the context that led members to join the movement in the first place, and some of why, when their new way of life was threatened, they chose death over returning to the society that had rejected them—and from which they were alienated long before joining Jim Jones’ anti-racist socio-religious movement. For many, Jonestown was a preventable and unnecessary tragedy, whose collective ‘revolutionary suicide’ did not end racism, capitalism, or poverty. The people seem to have believed wholeheartedly in preserving their way of life, and to have felt that the only way to do that was through self-sacrifice. A Jonestown member, in his final words, wrote:

[We] have chosen to give our lives. We are proud of that choice. Please try to understand ... Look at Jonestown, see what we have tried to do—This was a monument to life ... broken by capitalism, by a system of exploitation & injustice ... We did not want this kind of ending—we wanted to live, to shine, to bring light to a world that is dying for a little bit of love ... [We] are calm in this hour of our collective leave-taking ... We are a long-suffering people. Many of us are weary with a long search, a long struggle—going back not only in our own lifetime, but a long painful heritage ... If nobody understands, it matters not. I am ready to die now. (http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/)
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For the African-American members of the Temple, it may have been a grim choice between two negative options. Having experienced institutional violence, segregation, poverty, and overt racism in American capitalist society, and having found a community in which they were able to experience integration, acceptance, and equality, it is possible to imagine why people might willingly have chosen violence against themselves and their children over returning to the life they had escaped. In spite of some of the church’s questionable methods, it must have seemed preferable to attempting to rejoin mainstream American society. If any good is to come out of the tragedy of Jonestown, it will be through a thorough and complex analysis of its circumstances, and the institutionally and psychologically violent processes that prompted the movement in the first place.
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Bibliography


