AN INTERVIEW W/ GENERATION REVOLUTION

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"This is a Budget that puts the next generation first", announced the Treasury last month. But which "next generation"? Government policy doesn't touch all lives equally. The next generations of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, young survivors of domestic violence, and young people living with chronic illness or disability have all been dealt different and intersecting hands.

Generation Revolution focuses on the experiences of young black and brown people living in London today. We know in part which hand theirs is: more frequent school exclusions, poorer health outcomes, and the disproportionate burden of austerity, policing and counterterrorism measures. Whilst the #BlackLivesMatter movement makes waves on the other side of the Atlantic, conversations in the UK are often framed in comparative terms and narrowly focused on bullets, brutality, and deaths in state detention. As the film's directors Usayd Younis and Cassie Quarless put it, "police brutality is something that we talk about because it's a physical attack on the person, on black bodies, but institutional racism is in a lot of places." So Generation Revolution is about far more than police brutality, or indeed racism. Recognising that none of us live single-issue lives, the film charts the struggle of a new generation of black and brown radicals against racism, capitalism, austerity, and patriarchy; along, in their own words, "all axes of oppression".

Crucially in this instance, the medium is the message. As young black and brown activists themselves, Cassie and Usayd aim to avoid the dehumanising subject-object relation that pervades much traditional documentary, adopting instead a reflexive stance in which the film's subjects represent themselves. In this regard, Generation Revolution is a challenge levelled as much at the film and media industries as it is at oppressive government policy. "Often you have these people going into poor black and brown communities, and they go and talk about their narratives, without recognising their agency in doing so. And we challenge that as well."

IT: Who's the film about?

Usayd & Cassie: The new generation of young black and brown activists. Radical activists, who are very much informed by, among other things, intersectional feminism. The two main groups in the film are a group called R Movement, who are mostly based in London; people from all class backgrounds, and also racial backgrounds, and another group called the London Black Revolutionaries, who see themselves as politically black; so people of African descent and others who see themselves as black.

IT: And what are they doing?

Usayd & Cassie: The groups organise around what they would describe as 'all axes of oppression'. So it's again an intersectional form of organising. We see them organising against everything from homelessness and gentrification to police violence.

IT: What about the relationships between the groups? You allude to some strife in the trailer - what went on?

Usayd & Cassie: Erm... [laughter]

IT: That you can talk about.

Usayd & Cassie: Basically the Black Revs split off into another group called Black Dissidents, and people know about that. We won't go into the why's and how's of this particular split here. But beyond that, the groups are guided by a very similar ideology, attacking all forms of oppression; race and class and gender and other things. Even though in the film R Movement and the Black Revs don't necessarily meet in many different ways, they are guided by the same ideals. They go about things in very different ways, but the end goals are the same.

IT: Why 'Generation'? Why do you think that this generation is distinctive from the ones that have preceded it? There's a long tradition of black and brown organising. Why is this different?

Usayd & Cassie: It's important first to acknowledge that there's a rich history of black and brown organising in this country, something that is not necessarily given the credit and acknowledgement that it deserves. That said, it's also important to distinguish between those who organised before and the generation that has come to pass now. There is a disconnect between the way people used to organise, and this new generation of activists.

IT: What are the struggles that young black and brown people are facing today?

Usayd & Cassie: In the US we've seen a lot of organising around police brutality. And that's a really important issue here, even though we don't talk about it as much in the media. Institutional racism in the UK is incredibly prevalent and it affects people in ways that it's hard to put your finger on. So police brutality is something that we talk about because it's a physical attack on the person, on black bodies, but institutional racism is in a lot of places. Young black and brown people have access to worse schools; when they access healthcare or try to, the service they receive is lesser; they're overrepresented in prisons; they have difficulty accessing mental health services, and domestic violence services are being cut as well. So it's important to flip the question and say that the things that affect society at large through austerity measures disproportionately affect black and brown communities. Instead of necessarily talking about race; organising against racism, it's about the fact that all oppressions are racialised, and therefore you cannot disconnect the racial element from homelessness, and gentrification, and cuts to domestic violence services.

IT: So to take a more historical view, if we identify the struggle against austerity as pivotal now, what was it 40 years ago? Is that part of the distinction between activism then and now?

Usayd & Cassie: It's important to establish that what these young people are doing is rooted in the here and now. Many would argue that the face of racism in this country has changed. A lot of people have this idea of us living in a post-racial society. It's really important to understand that that of course is not the case. Instead what we see is a sort of cloaking of racism. So for example, what would formerly have been known as 'using racialised slurs' is masked under terms like 'gangs'. You have David Cameron talking about the fact that "the government needs to clamp down on gang culture". What that means is exactly the same thing that was meant in the past, only people were much more explicit about it. It's no longer cool or acceptable to be explicitly racist at all. So now you have the head of the English Defence League saying that they're not racist, which is obviously extremely ironic. We wouldn't say that the nature of the beast has changed necessarily, but its face certainly has.

IT: Did you see the impact of the 2011 riots in the actions and ethos of the groups that you followed?

Usayd & Cassie: Some of the characters in the film were heavily influenced by the riots, and certainly saw them as a political moment. They were an expression of real discontent from young black and brown people, and working-class communities in general. You have to think about what came out after the riots. You had David Starkey famously talking about how 'the whites had become the blacks'. Another important element is not just the language used to describe the people who participated in the riots, but also the brutal way in which they were penalised for what they did. This speaks to the wider policing context in this country, and the nature of the widening security state that we inhabit. And in turn, that speaks to the measures that are being introduced under PREVENT, and of course the increasing, disproportionate way that this affects black and brown communities.

IT: So we've done 'Generation', now 'Revolution'. We're all saying it all the time, and it certainly doesn't mean what it meant in the 17th century. Why do you think the term revolutionary applies to the people you were following and what they were doing; why is it relevant now?

Usayd & Cassie: The term revolution in its most basic sense is the idea of overturning systems. And again, in its most basic sense, these groups are guided by the desire to overturn systems of oppression; to overturn white supremacy and patriarchy and capitalism. They have very different means of doing this, but they're all guided by the same idea. And second, revolution implies something new, and it is somewhat revolutionary to have these groups that are completely organised and completely autonomous and led by black and brown people. They don't answer to a higher authority as they carry out actions to effect social change. At its base, that is a revolutionary thing. It's up to you to interpret whether that speaks to a historical message or understanding of revolution in its many forms.

IT: Were there any actions in particular that stuck with you as you were following the groups?

Usayd & Cassie: [laughter] There were really quite a few, and this is really an advertisement for the film: you should watch it because they do a lot of really exciting things. But to give you an example, the younger group, R Movement, were able to mobilise so much of their knowledge and new technology in ways we'd never seen before. They talk a lot about homelessness and gentrification, but rather than just talk about these things they decided to show solidarity with people who were not only affected by the housing crisis but also homeless. They organised a drive where they went out around London and gave people solidarity packages, with sanitary towels, food, other things - and these are young people. The oldest people in the group are maybe 21 or 23, but a few of them are still at college. They don't really have funds to speak of. They organised a crowdfunding campaign, and in two days they raised £150 to fund this action, and they went out on the streets; they sent a general callout, and there were young people who had never been involved in any kind of activism before who joined them. It was really actually quite moving, because often when people think about direct action, when they think about radical groups, they think about people in the streets shouting. A lot of the time people have this misconception that radical groups are about tearing things down. But actually these groups are also really interested in building, and building relationships, and showing people what they want to see, rather than just what they don't want to see. And we thought that was quite powerful and it stuck with us.

IT: Thinking about you two as filmmakers, who are your artistic and political influences?

Usayd & Cassie: We're definitely influenced by the older generation of black and brown filmmakers in this country. Unfortunately they're not very well known - John Akomfrah, Isaac Julien, collectives like the Black Audio Film Collective, Sankofa, who've done really important political work, but whose work unfortunately isn't that well known for various reasons, and can sometimes be unapproachable. We really wanted to make a political film; an artistically credible film that was approachable for everyone.

IT: Do you think that the political and the artistically credible are sometimes in tension? They're often posited that way.

Usayd & Cassie: Yes, even in the film world, in the media world, a lot of people say that you shouldn't make a film about the politics; that it shouldn't be political. We refute that. We believe that everything's political. As black and brown filmmakers, we think it's very hard to talk about our experiences without broaching political subjects: without broaching white supremacy; without broaching capitalism; without broaching patriarchy. As filmmakers we wouldn't want to keep quiet about these things. Our film is a challenge to the film industry as much as it's a challenge to wider society. We're talking about activism, but we're also representing ourselves. We're representing young black and brown people who are the subject of the film, but also the makers of the film - we represent that. It's important to acknowledge that documentary is not necessarily the creation of the people it intends to explore. In fact, it's often the complete opposite. So often you have these people going into poor black and brown communities, and they go and talk about their narratives, without recognising their agency in doing so. And we challenge that as well.

IT: You've in part already answered my next question - what do you want the film to do?

Usayd & Cassie: We want young black and brown people, who aren't necessarily politically involved, to see the film and see other young people like them who are organising in their communities, and who are actually tackling really difficult political questions. We want them to see that these people are just people like them, and that actually being an activist isn't a state of being. Anyone can be an activist. We hope that people see the film and go back to their communities and think 'maybe I could be an activist too'.

IT: So what stage are you at in the filmmaking process?

Usayd & Cassie: The film is almost complete, and we're really excited to take it to audiences across the country, so keep your eyes peeled! Later this year you'll be able to see it. In the meantime, follow us on Twitter @ genrevfilm, on Facebook at 'Generation Revolution', and you can sign up to our mailing list at www.genrevfilm.com - we'll keep you apprised of all of the developments.

IT: Well that's pretty much it from me. Is there anything else that you want committed to record?

Usayd & Cassie: [laughter]...Just that we think that we're in a really interesting time politically, not only when we look at the US, but when we look at this country too. Young people are doing things, and one of our points with this film was to dispel this myth about apolitical youth that just doesn't give a shit. People do care. We think that's important.