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Black Panther Party: 1966-1982

Abstract

The Black Panther party was founded in Oakland, California, in 1966. From its beginnings as a local, community organization with a handful of members, it expanded into a national and international party. By 1980, however, the Black Panther party was once again mainly an Oakland-based organization, with no more than fifty active members. In 1982, the party came to an official end. Despite its relatively short history, its modest membership, and its general eschewing of electoral politics, the Black Panther party was arguably the best known and most controversial of the black militant political organizations of the 1960s, with a legacy that continues to this day.

Disciplines

Social Influence and Political Communication

Comments

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raised by selling copies of Mao Zedong's "little red book" at the University of California's Berkeley campus.

PLATFORM AND PHILOSOPHY

The Black Panthers' initial "Platform and Program" consisted of ten points. The first nine points each stated what the party "wanted" for black Americans, and what the party "believed" about why and how these conditions should be met. The nine "wants" were: freedom, full employment, an end to capitalist exploitation, decent housing, education that emphasized black history and the current plight of blacks, exemption from military service, an end to police brutality, the freeing of all black prisoners, and juries of peers for blacks on trial. The nine "beliefs" associated with these "wants" were largely elaborations on these themes, justifying the demands and tying them to the long-standing political and economic exploitation of blacks. These elaborations called on government and business leaders to provide remedies but also emphasized the importance of self-determination and the right of blacks to protect their interests and secure their rights "by whatever means necessary," should the government and business community not heed their demands. This self-determination included a call for all blacks to arm themselves. The tenth plank in the Black Panther party's platform was a general overview, stating their demands for "land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace." It also called for a United Nations-supervised plebiscite, to be held throughout the "black colony," to determine "the will of the black people as to their national destiny."

The Black Panthers' philosophy was a sometimes inconsistent, often sophisticated amalgam, based on social contract theory as found in the U.S. Declaration of Independence, individual rights as outlined in the U.S. Constitution, Marxist anti-capitalism, the national lib-

eration theories of Frantz Fanon (the black psychiatrist/author who fought in the Algerian revolution), the self-determination espoused by the black power movement, and the more generalized cultural and political radicalism of the New Left. For example, the ten-point "Platform and Program" justified its demands by repeating, verbatim, the opening paragraphs of the U.S. Declaration of Independence in its conclusion. And two of its planks (the arming of all blacks and the demand for juries of peers) made direct reference to the Second and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution. By calling on the government and business community to assist in improving the economic conditions of blacks, the party also implicitly acknowledged the essential legitimacy of both.

At the same time, however, the Black Panthers' rhetoric was suffused with attacks on the capitalist system and with class-based analyses, and demonstrated an attraction to collectivist solutions to economic and social problems. The party also referred to black communities in the United States as colonies that had to be liberated in much the same way as third-world nations were becoming decolonized. Though the Black Panthers fell short of advocating complete separatism, calling instead for a plebiscite that would allow blacks to decide this issue for themselves, they increasingly placed the struggle of black Americans within the context of a larger, international, black liberation movement.

Finally, the Black Panther party's philosophy reflected and shaped both the radical militancy and the multiculturalism that was embedded in much of the politics of the 1960s. The regular carrying of arms by members of the party and the call for arming all blacks—while emphasizing self-defense and designed to remain within state and national laws (weapons were not concealed, and guns, though loaded, did not have bullets in their chambers)—put the Black Panthers in the vanguard of what was becoming an increasingly confrontational strategy on the part of many black nationalist and New Left organizations and splinter groups. At the same time, and despite numerous specific examples of sexism and anti-white rhetoric, the Black

Panther party connected the self-determinacy of blacks to the self-determinacy of other marginalized groups such as the poor, women, and homosexuals.

STRATEGY, TACTICS, AND PROGRAMS

Unlike most parties in the United States, the Black Panthers were not centrally interested in gaining power through elections. Throughout most of its history, its involvement in electoral politics was limited to occasionally endorsing the candidacy of progressives from other parties—for example, U.S. Representative Ron Dellums (Democrat, California). It also occasionally ran “symbolic” candidates for office, as when Huey Newton ran for U.S. Congress while in prison in 1968. The only serious efforts to win elected office were in 1973, when party members Bobby Seale ran for mayor and Elaine Brown ran for city council in Oakland, and in 1975, when Brown tried again for the city council.

The party focused instead on a series of community-based initiatives that, in keeping with its complex philosophy, ranged from reformist to revolutionary. Its most radical activity was the implementation of Malcolm X’s notion of self-defense. The Black Panthers formed “police patrols,” first in Oakland and then, as the organization grew, in other cities around the country. These patrols acted as a unique kind of “neighborhood watch” association, with visibly armed Black Panthers protecting citizens from potential abuses by the police. The patrols resulted in numerous confrontations with the police. The party’s general call for arming blacks, the use of armed party members as bodyguards for prominent blacks such as Betty Shabazz, and the occasional but dramatic public shows of force (as in 1967, when an armed group of Black Panthers lobbied the state legislature in Sacramento against pending legislation that would have limited their ability to carry arms)—all reinforced their militant image.

So, too, did the rhetoric of the party, which, while emphasizing self-defense, also suggested that armed confrontation might be inevitable in the struggle for black liberation. Finally, the militant image of the Black Panthers was accentuated by the increasingly frequent shoot-outs with police, resulting in the death of as many as twenty-eight members of the party.

Militant rhetoric, armed patrols, and dramatic confrontations were the most visible side of the Black Panthers and played an important role in the party’s growth, national prominence, and ultimate demise. But the party’s activities went well beyond this. First was its commitment to community service in the form of various “survival programs.” These programs, originally developed individually by various chapters of the party and then combined, in 1969, into a nationwide “serve the people program,” melded the provision of basic social services with consciousness raising and community organizing. Survival programs (all of which were provided for free) included breakfast programs for schoolchildren, liberation schools, medical clinics, clothing programs, buses to prison programs, a sickle cell anemia research foundation, housing cooperative programs, pest control programs, plumbing and maintenance programs, food programs, child development centers, escort services for the elderly, and ambulance programs. The party also organized a petition campaign for a referendum to decentralize police departments in Oakland, and it created the Intercommunal News Service, which published *The Black Panther* newspaper.

A second element of the Black Panthers’ strategy was forging alliances with other domestic New Left, ethnic, and black organizations. While these alliances were often troubled, they spoke to the party’s belief in the theoretical and practical interconnection of the black liberation movement with broader liberation movements. At various points, the Black Panthers worked with predominantly white New Left organizations such as the Peace and Freedom party, the White Panther party, and the Patriot party. Representatives of the party also spoke at numerous anti-Vietnam War and leftist rallies and gatherings, such as a meeting in

preparation for the “Days of Rage” protests at the 1968 Democratic National Convention and the 1969 moratorium in San Francisco. In turn, white-dominated organizations were active in a number of Black Panther–sponsored events and programs, such as legal defense committees for imprisoned members of the party. The Black Panthers were also one of the first supporters of the gay rights movement, placing this issue on their national agenda in 1970.

The Black Panther party also built ties with leftist ethnic organizations, such as the Brown Berets (Chicano), the Young Lords (Puerto Rican), and the Red Guard (Chinese). And despite their often critical rhetoric and occasional confrontations (most seriously, with the Los Angeles–based black nationalist organization Us), the Black Panthers had reasonably good working relationships with other black organizations such as the SNCC, the League of Revolutionary Workers, and the Republic of New Africa. Even the mainstream NAACP and SCLC lent a degree of financial, moral, and material support to the Black Panthers.

In addition to ties with domestic groups, a third element of the Black Panthers’ strategy was developing ties with international socialist, New Left, and black liberation movements. These ties flowed naturally from the party’s underlying philosophy, but were also the outgrowth of events and shifting tactics. The African independence movements of the 1950s and 1960s and the writings of Frantz Fanon had a profound influence on the Black Panthers. But it was not until Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver (1935–1998) became a fugitive in 1968 (the result of murder charges after a shoot-out with police following the assassination of Martin Luther King) and arrived, via Cuba, in Algeria, that the party developed formal international ties, beginning with Algeria’s Front de Liberation Nationale. The Black Panthers sent a formal delegation to the first Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algeria in 1969. There, the party interacted with representatives of left-wing revolutionary organizations and governments from the Middle East, Africa, Europe, Latin America, and Asia. While the Black Panthers were not officially recognized by the Algerian government,

they were able to use their presence to associate themselves with, and establish ties to, a number of revolutionary movements, including those from Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde Islands, Vietnam, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and North Korea, as well as the Palestine Liberation Organization. In addition, the Black Panthers’ anti-imperialist rhetoric, coupled with international publicity over both Cleaver’s travails and Huey Newton’s 1968 murder trial in Oakland, led to the formation of “committees of solidarity” in Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Britain, France, and West Germany. Cleaver also set up a Black Panthers office in Cuba, which was frequently visited by Europeans (and Americans) interested in radical politics. In 1969, Cleaver and a Panther delegation visited the newly established People’s Republic of the Congo, hoping to locate the party’s International Section headquarters there (these plans were ended in 1972 when leaders sympathetic to the Black Panthers were defeated in a power struggle). And in 1970, representatives of the Black Panthers, along with representatives of a number of radical movements and media, visited North Korea, Russia, North Vietnam, and China.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE, LEADERSHIP, AND MEMBERSHIP

From its roots as a local Oakland organization, the Black Panthers rapidly grew into a national and then international party. Six highly publicized events in 1967 and 1968 were central to this increase in membership and visibility (as well as notoriety): the use of armed Black Panthers to guard Betty Shabazz during a visit to the Oakland area and the resulting confrontation with police; several community rallies organized by the Black Panthers to tie the April, 1967, shooting of a black youth in Richmond, California, to a larger pattern of police violence

against blacks; the joining of the Black Panthers by already well known black activists such as Eldridge Cleaver (author of *Soul on Ice*), SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, and James Forman; the sending of an armed delegation of Black Panthers to the California State Assembly in Sacramento to protest pending legislation to ban the carrying of firearms; a shoot-out between Oakland police and the Black Panthers in which Huey Newton was wounded; and after the assassination of Martin Luther King, a shoot-out with Oakland police involving Eldridge Cleaver and resulting in the death of Panther Bobby Hutton.

While the exact size of the party is difficult to determine, the best estimates are that at its peak in 1969, the Black Panthers had as many as 5,000 members and between thirty-four and forty local chapters in the United States. These numbers underestimate the larger influence of the party. Panther-inspired rallies drew crowds estimated as large as 10,000 people, and a 1970 national poll (conducted by Louis Harris) found that 25 percent of African Americans felt the Black Panther party represented their views. In addition, the party had a semi-official or official presence in Cuba and Algeria, a number of affiliated support groups in Europe, and regular working relationships with the governments and/or organizations in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America.

As the party grew, it developed a three-tiered organizational structure. At the top level was the Central Committee, the party's governing body, located in Oakland, California. By 1967-68 the Central Committee consisted of a number of formal positions: chairman; chief of staff; communications secretary, prime minister; ministers of defense, information, education, justice, foreign affairs, religion, culture, and finance; and field marshals. The second organizational tier was "regional" and consisted of state chapters run by chapter leaders. Chapter leaders were appointed (or if self-selected, approved) by the national chairman or some other member of the national organization. The third tier was local, generally consisting of city branches headed by branch leaders who worked most closely with the rank-and-file

membership. The specific organizational structure of the regional and local chapters varied significantly depending on the size of the membership and the particular activities they were involved in. While many ideas and suggestions would flow up from the rank and file, through branch and chapter leaders, to the national organization, ultimate authority clearly resided at the national level. Directives on strategy and tactics were issued in the form of mandates from the top and, once issued, were expected to be followed with discipline.

While formal positions were held by different people throughout the party's history, the best-known and most influential leaders were co-founders Huey Newton (minister of defense) and Bobby Seale (chairman), Eldridge Cleaver (minister of information), David Hilliard (chief of staff), James Forman (minister of foreign affairs), Stokely Carmichael (prime minister), H. Rap Brown (minister of justice), and Kathleen Cleaver (communications secretary). Occasionally, state chapter leaders such as Fred Hampton (who was killed by Chicago police in 1969) also rose to national prominence. Other prominent black activists who were members of, or associated with, the Black Panthers included Angela Davis and George Jackson.

In both theory and practice, the Black Panthers drew much of its grassroots support (and some of its leadership) from what might be described as the lumpen proletariat—those who, according to Marx, were not integrated into the division of labor and so stood at the fringes of the class system. Eldridge Cleaver, who had himself spent much of his adult life in prison on a number of criminal charges, was the strongest proponent of recruiting members from those "who live by their wits, existing off what they rip off, who stick guns in the faces of businessmen and say 'stick em up' or 'give it up.' Those who don't want a job, who hate to work and can't relate to punching some pig's time clock." This focus was also consistent with the writings of Frantz Fanon, who emphasized the importance of this class of persons in third-world anti-colonial revolutions. However, both Newton and Seale, while seeing this largely criminal class as important to the Black Pan-

thers, had a broader vision of the party's power base that included the working poor. In addition, the party drew a good deal of its support (and leadership) from more educated strata, including a large number of students, educators, and professionals.

The role of women in the Black Panthers was also complex. Leadership positions were dominated by men, and numerous examples of sexist, patriarchal attitudes can be found in the party's organizational structure and rhetoric, especially in its formative years. Most notable was the gender-based distinction between "Panthers" and "Pantherettes," and Cleaver's "pussy power" slogan. More generally, women's opinions and issues were often discounted, and women were often treated as sexual objects within the organization. At the same time, the Black Panthers were committed to gender equality and saw women's liberation as part and parcel of the broader efforts to achieve self-determinacy for all people. The Panther-Pantherette distinction was dropped in 1968, and party leaders such as Cleaver apologized for their earlier sexist remarks and made strong statements in favor of equal rights—within the party and more generally—for women. Several women, including Kathleen Cleaver, Ericka Huggins, Joan Bird, and Angela Davis rose to important leadership positions or became visible spokespersons for the party. Elaine Brown served as chair of the Black Panthers from 1974 to 1977. Women such as Audrea Jones and Hazel Mack played important leadership roles at the state level, and the party endorsed and supported Shirley Chisholm's 1972 candidacy for president of the United States.

DIVISION AND DECLINE

From its inception, local and federal efforts were made to infiltrate, repress, and destroy the party. Beginning in 1967, and then continuing from 1968 through 1971 under the FBI's counter-intelligence program (COINTELPRO), the federal government waged a concerted war against the Black Panthers and other progres-

sive or radical groups and individuals. These efforts were designed to promote violence between the Panthers and other black organizations, to encourage internal dissension within the party, to undermine public support for the party and its leaders, and to provoke local police attacks. FBI tactics included surveillance, harassment (for example, issuing tickets for questionable traffic violations), targeting (for example, arresting members often on questionable charges), misinformation campaigns, and infiltrating the party.

These tactics succeeded in forcing the party to devote much of its resources to legal defense funds and paying tickets, fines, and bail-bond premiums. They also were at least partially responsible for the increase in arrests of members of the party, and in violent confrontations with the police. Already existing philosophic and strategic rifts within the party became exacerbated. At the center of these internal disagreements were Huey Newton, who increasingly felt that the party should put greater emphasis on its domestic community service programs, and Eldridge Cleaver, who believed that the party should advocate violent revolution and increase its ties with international revolutionary movements. This disagreement split other African-American national leaders, as well as state and local leaders and rank and file, into two increasingly confrontational camps.

With Cleaver in exile in Algeria, Newton had greater control over the national organization. Beginning in 1968, he succeeded in shifting the party's emphasis away from the militant rhetoric and actions advocated by Cleaver and back to community organizing and self-help, leading Cleaver and a number of national, local, and grassroots members to object. The resulting split, spurred by concerns of FBI infiltration, led to a series of purges and expulsions. Many other members, disenchanted with Newton's increasingly authoritarian tactics, resigned and joined other black liberation organizations. In February 1971, a local San Francisco television broadcast, intended to be a forum in which Newton and Cleaver (by phone from Algeria) would agree to discuss their differences, erupted into an argument that ended with each

expelling the other from the party. While Newton remained in control of the national organization, a number of state and local chapters aligned themselves with Cleaver.

In 1972, the national party, under Newton's leadership, made what would prove to be a major strategic mistake, deciding to run Bobby Seale for mayor of Oakland and a full slate of Black Panthers for the Oakland city council. Seale initially opposed the plan, but Newton convinced the party leadership to issue a directive closing all the state and local chapters of the party and concentrating all its resources and personnel in winning these elections. While many state and local members followed the directive and moved to Oakland, many others, unhappy with the strategy and unwilling to move, resigned from the party. The strategy did temporarily reinvigorate the party in Oakland, but marked the death knell for the Black Panthers as a national organization. In the end, the party ran Seale for mayor and Elaine Brown for city council in 1973, registering voters, distributing campaign literature, and organizing meetings and rallies. Seale finished second in a three-person race, and then lost the run-off election to the incumbent mayor by a vote of 77,634 to 43,719. Brown also did well but lost. From this point on the party remained an essentially local Oakland organization.

The party continued its downward spiral, with Newton becoming increasingly authoritarian and erratic in his approach. He took personal control of all the party's financial resources and alone decided on how the money would be spent. Under his control, the party became involved in criminal activities in Oakland. The party's "security cadre," created in 1972 to protect the Black Panthers' candidates for office, were increasingly used to force Oakland's criminal groups to pay the party for the right to continue their activities. In July 1974, Bobby Seale resigned from the party, followed soon after by the resignation of other prominent leaders.

Prompted in part by his abuse of alcohol and drugs, Newton became prone to violent outbursts, including the alleged murder of a prostitute. In order to avoid prosecution on this and

other charges, he fled to Cuba in August 1974. In his absence, Elaine Brown took control of what remained of the party. From 1974 through 1977, Brown, while continuing some of Newton's more authoritarian tactics, was able to reestablish the party (now claiming about 200 members) as a local community service organization, even getting government and private funding for some of their initiatives. Brown ran again for city council in 1975, finishing second. And the party played a key role in electing Oakland's first black mayor in 1977.

In 1977, Newton returned to the United States, prompting Brown to resign from the party. After two mistrials, the murder charges were dismissed and Newton took over the party. Under his leadership, the party quickly declined again into violence, criminal activities, and financial mismanagement. The last issue of *The Black Panther* was published in 1980. In 1982, with the closing of the Oakland Community School due to lack of funds, the Black Panther party came to an official end.

BLACK PANTHER LEGACY

Much of the Black Panthers' legacy is steeped in misinformation or exaggeration. Within the white establishment and among many former and current members of the Left, The Black Panthers are too often dismissed as an anti-white collection of small-time criminals motivated by a combination of self-interest and naive left-wing politics, whose reputation and influence was largely the result of the extensive media coverage they received. Among blacks, the party is taken more seriously, but the extent to which the party's demise was orchestrated by government repression and violence is often overstated. Both images, while selectively rooted in fact, oversimplify what is a complex and often inconsistent history.

Despite this demonizing or romanticizing, the party's emphasis on armed resistance, community service, and self-determination continues to

find echoes in liberation movements around the world. So, too, has the party's focus on the politicizing of the plight of black prisoners. Panther-style organizations (including many that have adopted the Panther name, such as the militant pro-elderly Gray Panthers) periodically emerge in communities both in the United States and overseas, though these organizations often borrow selectively from the party without a clear understanding of its history. A number of former Black Panthers have gone on to hold local office, work in other community organizations, or otherwise remain active in politics.

In 1989, following the murder of Huey Newton by a drug dealer, several former members of the Black Panthers began the publication of two newspapers, *The Commemorator* and *The Black Panther: Black Community Service*. The papers were designed to keep the party's legacy alive by reprinting important party documents and providing commentary on contemporary progressive politics. Memoirs by a number of former Black Panthers have also served to keep the Black Panthers in the public eye, as has the re-issuing of several formerly out-of-print Panther-inspired books. Even in these cases, however, the Black Panthers are often viewed through distorted lenses.

Perhaps the greatest legacy of the Black Panther party is as a cultural icon, a symbol of black liberation and black power. The party's slogan, "Power to the People," still resonates with progressive movements. The party's symbol still evokes a sense of militant self-determination among many blacks. The Black Panthers' ideology suffuses much of the lyrics

and sensibility of hip hop and rap music, including direct references to the party and its leaders. African-American-oriented magazines still periodically devote articles to the Black Panthers. The party has been the subject of plays and movies, such as *Panther* (a Huey P. Newton story) and a number of websites are devoted to the Panthers, their memory, and their continuing relevance to the politics of black liberation.

MICHAEL X. DELLI CARPINI

See also: Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Toure); Angela Yvonne Davis; Lowndes County Freedom Organization; Huey Newton; Peace and Freedom Party; Robert George "Bobby" Seale.

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