

The Legacy of the Black Panther Party

JoNina M. Abron

1986

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Rarely do activists in a political movement have the opportunity, or luxury, to bring their work to a formal closure. The fluidity of societal conditions which gave rise to the development of the movement and changes in attitudes by the activists toward the movement often prevent any type of conscious dissolution and/or final summation.

The Black Panther Party (BPP) was no exception. One of the most militant movements to emerge out of the social-political upsurge in the U.S. during the 1960s, the BPP was organized at a time when many black Americans - particularly students and other youth - had become disgruntled with the civil rights movement's primary tactic of non-violence.

While Southern blacks had made major gains in voting rights, these gains had not come without numerous murders and brutal beatings and bombings of blacks by white racists - police, the KKK and others. White racist violence against blacks was on the rise in the North as well.

Within this context, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense¹ was founded in Oakland, California, by Huey P. Newton and Bobby G. Seale in October 1966. Among the demands in the party's initial 10-Point "Platform and Program: What We Want, What We Believe,"² the BPP called for black self-determination, full employment, "decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings," the exemption of all black men from military service and "an immediate end to police brutality and murder." Invoking the U.S. constitutional right to bear arms, the party urged blacks to arm themselves for self-defense.

DEMISE OF B.P.P.

The demise of the BPP can be attributed to a combination of factors. These included ruthless government repression from such national agencies as the FBI on down to local police departments;³ serious internal organizational errors; and the onset of new organizing strategies - required by changing socioeconomic and political conditions in the U.S. - that were significantly different from those employed by black activists in the '60s and early '70s. An in-depth, objective analysis of the Black Panther Party is a task that remains to be done, a task essential for the future growth and development of a progressive black liberation struggle in the U.S.

October 1986 marked the 20th anniversary of the founding of the BPP, once described by late FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover as the organization posing "...the greatest threat to the internal security of the country..."⁴ Former BPP members and supporters gathered in October in Harlem, New Jersey and Oakland to celebrate the group's 20th anniversary. These celebrations were highly emotional events, bringing together many people, some of whom had not seen each other since the late '60s. One ex-party leader who attended the Oakland "reunion" commented to the author, "It [the reunion] was the final roll call."

The Oakland reunion paid tribute to such free community "Survival Programs" initiated by the BPP as Breakfast for Schoolchildren, Health Clinics, Legal Aid and Education, Busing to Prisons, Oakland Community School and Oakland Community Learning Center. The latter operated a variety of activities for children, teens and adults.

¹ "Self-Defense" was later dropped from the name.

² The platform and program adopted in October 1966 was revised in March 1972.

³ See "The FBI's Covert Action Program to Destroy the Black Panther Party," in *Book III, Final Report of the Select Committee To Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, United States Senate* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 23, 1976).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

FALLEN COMRADES

The names of community people, attorneys, entertainment celebrities and others were read in honor of their work, strong support for and generous financial contributions to the party.

Former party leader Ericka Huggins gave a moving commemoration to the BPPs "fallen comrades" - the 28 members who were killed, the majority of them in altercations with law enforcement authorities. Huggins' husband, Jon, and Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter, leaders of the Los Angeles BPP chapter, were assassinated on January 17, 1969, at the University of California-Los Angeles by suspected FBI informants.⁵

In a passionate speech, a former BPP political prisoner reminded the audience that an undetermined number of ex-party members, many whose names are no longer known, are still incarcerated on charges they received while Panthers. "When are we going to get them out of jail?" Bruce Richard asked.

The BPP greatly influenced the mass politics and culture of the '60s and early '70s. For example, the party's denunciation of police and other law enforcement agents as "pigs," whose primary role is to oppress black, other minority and poor people, was widely used in the U.S., both by community activists and non-activists. The organizational methods and fiery oratory of the BPP were widely adapted by U.S. groups and movements of the era, such as the American Indian Movement, Students for a Democratic Society, Chicano and Asian rights organizations and the women's rights struggle.

B.P.P. CONTRIBUTIONS

Former party members who made cultural contributions were honored at the Oakland reunion. They included Emory Douglas, renowned BPP artist, whose "pig" caricatures and dramatic illustrations of blacks regularly appeared on posters and in the BPP's newspaper; Elaine Brown, a former party leader and vocalist, who recorded two albums, "Seize the Time" and "Until We're Free"; "The Lumpen," a BPP vocal quartet; and poet Huggins.

In addition, establishment of the party's archives at Howard University's Spingarn Research Center was announced. Paul Coates, an ex-BPP member now employed at Spingarn, will coordinate the nationwide collection of the archival materials.

Looking back at the Black Panther Party's contributions, one can point to several concepts, movements and community-based institutions, some of which remain today. These include:

- Current free breakfast and lunch programs for public school children, greatly inspired by the party's breakfast programs which highlighted the contradiction of hungry children amidst the affluence of the U.S.;

⁵"Assassin of B.P.P. Leaders Linked to Jonestown Massacre," *The Black Panther Intercommunal News Sendee*, December 16-29, 1978, pp. 1 and 13. George and Larry Stiner, then members of US (United Slaves), were convicted of second degree murder and conspiracy to commit murder for the slayings of Carter and Huggins. However, BPP members who witnessed the killings said that Claude Elvin Hubert was the culprit. Darthard Perry, a self-confessed, paid FBI agent provocateur for seven years, testified in a 1977 sworn affidavit that he saw Hubert shoot Carter and Huggins and that he (Perry) had seen Hubert and the Stiner brothers several times at the Los Angeles headquarters of the FBI. An FBI memo of December 1968, released in December 1975 by the Senate Intelligence Committee, revealed the Bureau's plans to provoke conflict between the BPP and US in southern California.

- Preventive health care, an idea popularized by BPP free health clinics;
- Local organizing across the country against police brutality. The party's outspoken stance against state terror, best exemplified in its early "community patrols of the police," drew national attention to the BPP and helped swell its ranks from a handful of members in Oakland to several thousand nationwide.

PRISON ORGANIZING AND ELECTORAL POLITICS

- Protests and organizing against injustices inflicted on black and other minority prison inmates. Most notable in the BPP's prison organizing was party "Field Marshal" George Jackson, who had spent 11 years incarcerated when he was killed at San Quentin Prison on August 21, 1971. Jackson's book *Soledad Brother*, a searing indictment of the U.S. penal system, was instrumental in drawing national attention to inhumane conditions inside the country's prisons.
- Increased voter registration and electoral involvement by blacks nationwide, inspired by Bobby Seale's 1973 bid for mayor of Oakland. Although Seale lost the race, he won 43 percent of the total vote after having forced the white Republican incumbent into a runoff. The BPP, after reversing its earlier denunciation of electoral politics,⁶ provided the leadership for several voter registration drives in the Oakland/Alameda County area between 1972 and 1977. These drives were key in the elections of Alameda County's first black supervisor, John George, in 1976, and Oakland's first black mayor, Lionel Wilson, in 1977.⁷ Prior to Seale's mayoral campaign, the party forged an electoral alliance in California with the Peace and Freedom Party. Co-founder Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, Kathleen Cleaver, among other Panthers, ran for office on the Peace and Freedom ticket.
- Oakland Community School, a community-based elementary school that became a national model for alternative schools, and was given a special award by the California Legislature for its educational achievements.

INTERCOMMUNALISM

Internationalism, or "intercommunalism" as the party called it. *The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service* regularly reported on and pointed out connections between the struggles of oppressed peoples in such countries as Vietnam, Mozambique, Angola, New Zealand and Puerto Rico and the struggle of minority groups and poor and working class whites in the U.S. BPP leaders traveled to China, North Korea and Denmark, among other places, and also met with African liberation fighters like the late Mozambique President Samora Machel.

Who are the Black Panthers today? Their ranks include cab drivers, accountants, graduate students, secretaries, lawyers, a Chicago Alderman, TV technicians, cooks, union organizers, bartenders and security guards. They are people who, as one former member said, are "raising [their families]."

⁶ See *To Die for the People* by Huey P. Newton.

⁷ "Black Panthers meet to recall founding," *The Tribune*, October 26, 1986, p. A- 10.

The Black Panther Party's contributions to popular politics and culture are its legacy to current progressive political and social movements, both in the U.S. and abroad. Most of the issues the party raised regarding the oppression of black and other poor people have yet to be resolved. Indeed, in far too many cases, conditions for minority groups in the U.S. are worse than they were 20 years ago.

Opinions about the Black Panther Party are as wide ranging today as in the group's heyday. Historically, however, there can be little doubt that the party played a major role in influencing the style and content of the post-civil rights black liberation struggle and the overall progressive movement in the U.S.

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1986

The Black Scholar, vol. 17, no. 6, pp. 33-37.

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