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April 30, 2023

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WRTG 3020 Final Paper Final Draft

Public Enemy

In October 2016, hundreds of people from across the world came to Oakland, California to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the creation of the Black Panther Party, an organization dedicated to educating and defending African Americans (Har 1). The party served as an influence for many modern resistance movements, including the Black Lives Matter movement, but some feel as though little of note was accomplished. Former party chairwoman Elaine Brown noted during the anniversary, “The only change is that time has passed. We are the poorest. We have the least economic interests in the country, and consequently we are an oppressed people (Har 1).” At a glance this assessment seems true, African Americans today still face worse living conditions, worse education, and worse treatment by society as a whole, so it is tempting to write off the Panthers’ achievements as irrelevant. However, despite the party’s failure to cause the kind of immense change that many members wanted, they were still a significant positive influence on the United States as a whole.

The Black Panther Party was founded on October 15th, 1966 by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. Both were African American men born in the South who had moved at a young age to California where their families sought better job prospects and an escape from discrimination (Smith, 31). Each one later enrolled at Merritt College in Oakland, where they finally met through the Afro-American Association on campus. Seale and Newton eventually grew disillusioned with campus organization, believing it to be ineffective outside of the confines of the school, and so decided to form the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (Syed 1; Jeffries 2). The core goals of the party as conceived by Newton and Seale consisted of ten points:

1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community. 2. We want full employment for our people. 3. We want an end to the robbery by the white man of our Black Community. 4. We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings. 5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society. 6. We want all Black men to be exempt from military service. 7. We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of Black people. 8. We want freedom for all Black men held in federal, state, county, and city prisons and jails. 9. We want all Black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their Black communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States. 10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace. And as our major political objective, a United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the Black colony in which only Black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate, for the purposes of determining the will of Black people as to their national destiny (Foner 2, 3).”

This platform was a large part of what distinguished the Panthers from other civil rights movements. The rhetoric used by the party’s program is purposefully divisive. Point five disparages America, point six denounces the draft and, implicitly, the Vietnam War. The language is unequivocal and unafraid to demand more than was being sought by more mainstream activists at the time. These revolutionary ideas served to help the Panthers stand out from more moderate groups like the NAACP, which let them appeal to those who felt disillusioned with other resistance movements.

This image of the party as radical extended beyond just rhetoric. Newton believed large street protests to be counterproductive, and so tried to steer the party away from grand public demonstrations and toward direct action (Spencer 23). With this idea in mind, the party initiated the copwatching program, wherein members of the party would arm themselves with loaded rifles and follow around police officers in an attempt to prevent police brutality (Simonson 408). The program was an incredibly effective deterrent. Because California law permitted open carry and police monitoring, there were no legal grounds to go after the group, and officers that attempted to intervene extralegally often backed down in the face of a credible threat (Simonson 409). In one particularly famous instance, after being ordered out of his car while copwatching, Newton brought his gun out of the car with him. Upon being asked what his intentions were, Newton said simply, “If you try to shoot at me or if you try to take this gun, I’m going to shoot back at you, swine (Winkler 1).” To the amazement of the crowd that had gathered at the scene of this confrontation, Newton was not arrested (Winkler 1). Similar encounters throughout California helped launch the Panthers. Citizens from nearby communities that suffered from excessive policing began joining the party, and word of mouth from people who had seen the Panthers in action granted them statewide prominence (Winkler 2).

The Panthers’ bold acts made them stand out from other Black Power movements at the time, which helped them gain notoriety but also made them an enticing target for vilification. In his article on journalism and the Black Panthers, historian Michael Staub notes, “The Panthers were definitively cast in the folk devil role in the mainstream media—portrayed as a motley crew of unstable, paranoid black juvenile delinquents (57).” This kind of portrayal is evident in newspapers from the 1960s and 1970s. One contemporary article about a Panther protest at the California legislature wrote, “With loaded rifles and shotguns in their hands, members of the antiwhite Black Panther party marched into the state capital today… the 30 young negroes, including 5 women, threw the building into a turmoil (New York Times 1967).” The language in the article is alarmist and draws explicit attention to the threat of violence, and this article was by no means an outlier. Newspapers frequently drew attention to noted members like Fred Hampton’s communist leanings to play on the fear of communism that had arisen amidst the Cold War (Staub 59). *Time* magazine warned that the growing influence of the party could instigate a race war (Staub 59). *Harper’s* even went so far as to compare Seale to Hitler directly: “Both are anti-rational, Hitler’s injunction to ‘think with your blood’ is echoed by Bobby’s appeal to the impulse of the Black Soul (Fischer 18).”

The media industry was hostile towards the Panthers, so they were forced to spread their message independently. One of the party’s most effective tools for public outreach was its newspaper, aptly named *The Black Panther*. The paper was first published in April of 1967, in response to the death of Denzil Dowell, a young African American who had been killed by police earlier in the month (Roman 11). *The Black Panther* would go on to be one of the most successful alternative newspapers in the country, providing revenue and work for party members as well as spreading Panther rhetoric at an astonishing rate (Gonzales 339; Spencer 23). The newspaper featured a broad array of content in support of the movement including poems, editorials, cartoons, songs, and more (Foner 7). The pieces featured all function differently, but almost all of them speak to the Panther’s broader rhetorical efforts to appear as a movement that is peaceful by nature, but not afraid to fight when necessary. For example, a piece entitled “On Violence” written by the Black Panther Party minister of information Eldridge Cleaver begins, “Let us make one thing crystal clear: We do not claim the right to indiscriminate violence. We are not out to kill up white people. On the contrary, it is the cops who claim the right to indiscriminate violence and practice it everyday (Foner 19).” In this passage, Cleaver first emphasizes that the Panthers are not violent by nature but rather are victims of the police. By espousing this worldview Cleaver paints himself and by extension the party as reasonable people in an unjust system. This both bolsters the party’s ethos by making their radical action seem warranted and creates pathos by painting the party as the underdog fighting against a tyrannical government. The article elaborates on this idea a bit before pivoting to a call to action: “But black people, this day, this time say HALT IN THE NAME OF HUMANITY! YOU SHALL MAKE NO MORE WAR ON UNARMED PEOPLE (Foner 19).” Here Cleaver is writing under the assumption that, having been told that the Panthers are fighting only to defend themselves, any reader who has gotten this far will no longer be neutral but rather actively sympathetic or actively antipathetic. The line about making war on unarmed people has a dual meaning depending on which side of the dichotomy the reader lands on. For a reader who believed Cleaver’s earlier claim, it is a plea for peace. Attacking an unarmed person is considered wrong by nearly every ethical system in the world, and so if the Panthers are in fact peaceful by nature, it is unjust to fight them. Ergo, the reader will no longer make war. For a reader who was not swayed by the opening, the line is a threat. If the reader continues to oppose the Panthers, continuing to make war, it will not be on unarmed people. In other words, if they attack the party, the party will fight back.

One of the party’s biggest strengths was its willingness to support and collaborate with other resistance movements. The Young Lords Organization, a group working to fight Puerto Rican discrimination in the United States, worked together frequently with the Black Panthers, hosting political education classes cooperatively and providing security for each other's events (Gonzales 339). The Panthers also allied themselves with LGBT activist groups on the basis that both were oppressed by the police and traditional American institutions. In Historian Jared Leighton’s article on the cooperation between the Panthers and LGBT groups in California, he argued that “Despite differences between discrimination and oppression based on race and that based on sexual orientation, gay liberationists and the Black Panthers shared a common identity as criminalized groups” (862). Fred Hampton, a well respected leader of the party, eventually pushed this collaboration even further, forming the Rainbow Coalition, an alliance of civil rights groups with the goal of fighting corruption, racism, and poverty. This collaboration drew members from numerous advocacy groups in the Midwest, including Latinos, Native Americans, Chinese people, and even poor whites (Mohn 1).

The intersectionality the Panthers promoted by collaborating with other minority organizations makes sense when considering the party’s view of their struggle as part of the larger worldwide pursuit of human rights rather than as uniquely Black or American. The party had taken this expansive view from its inception. Seale once said of the ten point program that forms the basis of Panther ideology, “these demands have a very international proletarian likeness to those of any people who are struggling against the three levels of oppression…these three levels of oppression exist in virtually every country where there is overt capitalistic exploitation (Foner 78).” This anti-capitalist focus became even more central the longer the party operated, including an alteration to point 3 of the ten point platform from “the robbery of the white man” to “the robbery of the capitalist” in 1969 (Roman 17). Viewing the world through this broader lens both helped and harmed the movement. On the one hand, during the Cold War human rights rhetoric was associated with communist thought and thus unpopular among many Americans (Roman 9). On the other hand, leaning into efforts to promote things such as healthcare, housing, and food as inalienable rights inspired some of the party’s most well regarded and effective programs.

Some of the most enduring parts of the Panthers’ legacy have been the community service initiatives referred to by the party as survival programs. These programs covered a variety of needs, such as clothing and medical care, by offering direct assistance to disadvantaged communities. The most successful of these programs, known as the Free Breakfast Program, began in January of 1969 at a church in Oakland (Lateef and Androff 7). The program was designed to highlight and offset the failures of the National School Lunch Program, which at the time offered children reduced cost meals, but not free meals leaving many to go hungry (Pien 1). By 1971 there were Panther operated breakfast programs in 36 cities, entirely staffed by party members and local volunteers (Lateef and Androff 8, 10). One reason for the effectiveness of the program was that the Party has strict guidelines regarding how each branch was run. Any building used for the program had to have space to seat 50 children as well as room for their parents and children who were waiting to eat. The party also mandated that there were sufficient staff and resources to ensure food quality and maintain sanitary conditions in the kitchen and dining areas (Lateef and Androff 8,9). The success of the program drove an influx of new members. Safiya Bukhari, a Black Panther who joined after seeing the success of the program in New York was originally opposed to the party, but was drawn to them after seeing that they were still facing police backlash despite helping the community: “ [The police] were not making an effort to feed the children, but they didn’t want us to feed the children (Lateef and Androff 12).”

Despite the successes of party programs and rhetoric, the Black Panther Party was unable to keep going in the face of significant interference from the government. The enmity felt towards the Panthers by the government was no secret. Local police would frequently try to destroy party programs and newsstands, even shutting down aid services like the free breakfast program with claims of poisoned food (Lateef and Androff). This resistance however was nowhere near as significant as that the party faced from the federal government. In 1969 FBI director J Edgar Hoover called the party “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country” (Staub 57) and, unsurprisingly, the FBI took drastic action against this perceived threat. The party was subject to significant interference under COINTELPRO, a series of programs initiated by the FBI to undermine numerous United States based political organizations. Released documents from COINTELPRO show that the government operated disinformation campaigns to harm the Panther’s public image, surveilled Panther leaders and sympathizers, and even planted informants and instigators within the party (FBI 8, 10, 12). Notably, the party was fully aware of these efforts to bring them down. The issue was that to effectively resist the subterfuge would require abandoning some of the Panthers’ core strategies. Seale identified the party’s biggest weakness as the politically uneducated members that made up much of the group (Franklin 554). The party’s rhetoric was designed to appeal to these average people, but they were the members who were least aware of how to fight back without creating more problems. By kicking them out, the party lost its front line forces, which would diminish the strength they needed to stay relevant, but by keeping them in they made themselves vulnerable to infiltration, which could lead to the destruction of the party entirely (Franklin 554). The party opted to maintain the scale they were used to operating with and as a result, slowly fell apart. Bobby Seale quit the party in 1974, and Huey Newton dissolved the party officially in 1982, marking the end of the Black Panthers (Har 1).

The story of the Panthers seems at first like a story of failure. The party was only in operation for under twenty years and faced constant pushback from the media, the government, and society at large. However, despite this short and fraught lifetime, the party had an immense impact worldwide. The party educated an underclass that would have been otherwise written off (Franklin 555). The success of their Breakfast Program eventually prompted Congress to increase food aid for public schools (Pien 1). Their rhetoric was even adopted by activist groups worldwide, including countries as far away as India and Australia (Duncan 3). Even though the Black Panther Party eventually fell apart, it left a positive impact on the communities it served, and the bold acts and rhetoric of its members have made them an enduring inspiration to those fighting for justice and equality even today.

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